

# Everyday Madness



Matthew Malone



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A Mostly  
True Story

There's a fat blister on my cock - down there by the base - that I've taken to calling Mildred. Mildred is a resilient old bitch, even if she often bleeds milky puss. She's been with me awhile, survived all the creams and pills and fingernail picking I could throw her way.

Ladies don't like Mildred. Often, as their faces draw near and their pretty mouths open to take me in, the sight of Mildred will send them reeling back, as if my penis were an angry raccoon.

I don't mind. Life is endless war.

Mildred is my battle scar.

It's a Friday night in June, maybe August, and I'm at a hotel in Atlanta. I can't remember the name of the place, but it seems nice - bright new carpet, towering ceilings, marble columns that rise imposingly from the floor, an open bar, and a female wait-staff with big tits and tight asses

I haven't slept in a week.

My parents are having a retro party - some sort of disco theme - so I'm dressed in a yellow and green plaid leisure suit. The pants are flat in the front and flare out at the ankles around black leather platform shoes. My shirt is just a regular white Oxford, but I leave it unbuttoned until an inch or two above my belly button. Unsure what socks would be tacky enough, I'm wearing none. Earlier, sipping my fourth scotch, I caught a glance of myself in a mirror and laughed wildly.

I've been sneaking away to the bathroom throughout the night, snorting long lines of cocaine off a travel brochure that I picked up in the lobby. The last time, as I stepped out of the stall, my father was washing his hands. He glared at me in the mirror while I pushed up the high skin over my cheekbone and sniffled loudly. He asked if I was sick then, drunk, wandered off without

waiting for my answer.

I haven't eaten today. Now, on my sixth drink, I'm slipping down into that mean, drunk place. Trying to hide near the bar, I watch one of my mother's friends who designs lingerie for Playboy. Can she get me a date with one of her models? Probably not. Stephen Summers is near the door, flirting with my cousin. I hope they don't end up fucking.

The air in this room is sour and smells like the mist from a fresh sneeze. There's a low, painful ringing noise reverberating from the walls. I wince, wonder if anyone else hears it, doubt that they do. One of the ballroom's walls is made of thick glass windows. I stand in front of it and watch the falling darkness. Outside, above the silhouettes of tall buildings, the sky is gunmetal-gray. The clouds are hanging low.

"Reilly! Reilly!"

I turn. An old woman walking towards me, pulling behind her a thin man with brown hair. The man is short with a dark shadow of beard.

"Reilly," the old woman, whom I don't recognize, says. "I'm glad I found you." She's wearing a faded royal blue pant suit. Her hair is curled and permed. "I was just talking to Remmie here, and it turns out he's the mayor down there in..." She snaps her fingers. "What's the name of the town you're at now? Where you're going to school? Your grandma told me but I just can't recall."

The way she snaps her fingers annoys me. I contemplate kicking her in the cunt, but instead just murmur, "I don't remember either."

She gives me a strange look then turns to the man. A smile hints at the corners of his mouth, but he just shrugs at her and offers no answer.

"Oh well," she continues. "He's the *mayor*. I thought I should introduce you two. It really is a small world, isn't it?"

"Remmy?" I ask him. "With a Y?"

He has on a flowered polyester shirt, faded yellow bell bottoms, and camo hunting boots.

"IE," he tells me.

"Ah," I shake his hand, say, "Nice to meet you. I'm the anti-man."

He raises his brow. The old woman gives a fake little titter. Her plaster smile cracks and tries to break. Remmie laughs. He's swaying slightly.

Later, I'm standing with my ear against the wall, hunting for the source of that goddam ringing noise when, out of the corner of my eye, what looks like a pterodactyl - maybe just a mutant flying lizard - flaps past the windows.

I drain my drink and chew up the ice. The loud popping and cracking between my teeth almost overwhelms the ringing. I open my fist and let the short, ornately carved crystal glass drop to the floor. It bounces once against the carpet before settling on its side.

I'm heading to the bathroom to sniff more cocaine when there's a commotion at the door. My father is waving his bottle of beer and screaming at a mountainous security guard.

The big guard's dressed in a uniform of navy slacks and a white collared shirt. A gold shield is stitched to his sleeve. None of the man's clothes fit him right - too tight and too short. A white plastic name tag pinned to his chest reads "BOWERS" in strong black letters.

"Quiet down? Quiet down?" My father is yelling. "What's your problem, asshole? We rented this whole goddam floor! We'll be as loud as we want! The concierge told me we wouldn't be disturbed, so get your fat ass out of here and go bitch to him!"



I arrive just as my father drops his beer and shoves the guard with both fists. Stepping between them, I raise my arms, one hand on each man's chest. This brings my brightly colored jacket sleeves into clearer view, and the interlacing striped fabric makes me nauseous - a feeling of rabid squirrels trying to claw through my stomach lining.

I begin spewing clichés like, "Okay, guy, we don't want any trouble," and, "I know you're just doing your job, man. We can work this out," but the guard is beyond reason. Blotchy redness is climbing up his neck.

"Return to your rooms now, sirs," he orders. "This gathering is being officially ordered to disband."

From my father: "Disband? Are you fucking serious, you stupid prick?" He looks at me, confused, then angry as he turns back to Bowers. "Get the fuck out of here, you asshole. Leave us the hell alone!"

I palm a folded-up hundred dollar bill from my pocket and offer it to the guard. Ben Franklin's one visible eye stares up at me before the guard shakes my hand and accepts the bill.

"Thank you," he says, "but I'm still going to need you and your party to leave this area."

Everyone's watching now. The cocaine makes my blood angry and hot.

I shake my head. "You fucking cunt," I hiss. "You really want to be like this? You're gonna take the money and still be a dick?" I grab the name tag pinned to his chest and rip it off, calmly drop it to the floor, and say, "Turn around, and get - the fuck - away from us."

"You little shit!" the guard yells. His arm comes up with a clenched fist, loaded to swing.

Before I can set myself in a defensive Shaolin Kung Fu stance - left palm forward, right fist clenched - I see Remmie running up

behind the guard. His arms are raised over his head, holding up a big ceramic serving platter that's dripping brightly colored red and yellow sauces down into his hair.

In a swift arch, he brings the thick plate down onto the guard's head. I wince at the sound of the man's skull cracking under his thin, muffling flesh. Bowers falls in a big mound. Blood, already pumping from the torn skin, turns his hair dark and wet. It saturates the thin hotel carpet and swells out into a macabre, rust brown halo around his head. I kick him twice quickly - once in the gut, then again on the side of his thick throat.

"Well alright," my father says. "Back to the party!"

The police arrive with an ambulance. Bowers leaves on a stretcher. The guests mill around the cops, giving explanations while offering money and future favors. The officers leave - richer, and apologizing for the inconvenience.

The party goes on.

I'm in line at the bar when Remmie sidles up next to me. His smile is big and drunk.

"How 'bout that, Reilly?" he asks.

"Good fun, Mayor. Highlight of the party."

I order myself a scotch, him a bourbon. We take our drinks and wander toward the windows.

"So what do you do, Reilly?" he asks. "Besides college, I mean."

"I've been working on a nervous breakdown for the last couple months," I tell him.

"Oh yeah? How's that going?"

I shrug and throw out my bottom lip, "Alright, I suppose."

"You like to hunt?" he asks. "I find that helps with stress."

"Not since I was a kid."

“I go out everyday. Got to kill something, right? Otherwise, I’m just not myself.”

“Really.” I draw the word out. “I guess that’s one way to handle things. I’m pretty sure I’m insane, though, so I probably shouldn’t start murdering things. Could lead down a bad road, you know?”

“Killing - not murder,” he corrects. “Fine line difference.”

“Sorry,” I tell him, then ask, “You ever kill a Polar Bear, Mr. Mayor?”

“No. But my friend shot a Bald Eagle once.”

“Isn’t that illegal?”

“He’s in federal prison now.” Rennie looks over my shoulder and takes a drink.

“Too bad. Sounds like a hell of a guy. You hear that fucking ringing?”

“He ignores me, says, ‘Sasquatches have been bad this year.’”

“What’s that?”

“Sasquatches,” he repeats. “Smelly fuckers have been everywhere.”

“Oh yeah? Well, that’s interesting.”

“I shot one a couple years ago. A little one. A pup.” He sips his drink. “Just winged it, though.”

“You sure it wasn’t a raccoon?” I ask. “Or a really hairy person?”

“Nah. It was Bigfoot. I usually coat my ammo in poison dart frog mucus, but that day I forgot.” He empties his glass. “Just think, if I wouldn’t have been so goddam sloppy, the poison probably would have dropped that fucker after a hundred yards. I’d be famous now.”

“Tough break.”

He picks at his teeth with his fingernail. “I’ve got a hard on. You like pussy, Reilly?”

“I surely do, Mr. Mayor. Very much, actually.”

“You like strippers?”

“Not as much as whores. Strippers leave you with a hard on, and that empowers the terrorists. We can’t let those bastards win.”

“I fucking love whores,” Rennie says. “Let’s go buy us some. You grab a couple bottles from that bartender and meet me in the lobby.”

“Alright.”

He starts off, then spins back and points a finger in my face.

“You ain’t a Jew, are you?”

“No.”

“Good. Alright. Just checking. Let’s go.”

We spend the next hours of the night weaving along Buckhead roads, drinking bourbon and occasionally firing Rennie’s .45 out the window of his truck. Strip clubs dot the area and we visit them all, blatantly smuggling in liquor, the bottles lumpy bulges under our coats.

When our erections become painful, we drive to a Korean massage parlor - Miss Kim’s AAA Spa. It’s a discreet store front nestled in a strip mall. Next door is a limousine service, and long black cars fill the parking lot. I pay my money and the madam leads me to a dark little room.

Lying on the stiff massage table, my tacky Goodwill suit is a rumpled pile on the floor and the liquor is pounding full bore towards blackness. An almond eyed Asian fondles my flaccid cock in her tiny hands. As she bends down and begins to lick me with quick, darting movements of her triangular tongue, my mind begins to wander and my body begs for opiates, yearns for a shot from the sharp, shiny needle.

Intravenous drug users are a special kind of people. When you become willing to inject dirty street drugs directly into your blood stream, you’ve reached a point in your life that’s hard for most

people to imagine, and even fewer to actually reach. It sets you apart from the average user, the posers who snort two or three small lines of cocaine on Saturday nights while sipping cheap domestic beer and flirting with drunk women.

I've heard that once the big veins in the arms and legs become maxed out, some addicts start shooting off into their dicks. I'm not there yet, but the option isn't totally outside the realm of possibility. For now I can still get off between my toes.

I need heroin.

No, stop - don't think about that. Don't think. Focus, concentrate on the chink. She's sucking on my balls now. Did I pay extra for that? I can't remember.

I struggle to raise my head, macabre satisfaction rising up in anticipation of the whore's reaction to Mildred. When my vision finally focuses, something's obviously wrong. The girl's still going. The blister's gone. It's just vanished. Not even a mark.

Was it ever there? Was Mildred real? Would I hallucinate a herpes blister? I try to remember the first time I noticed Mildred down there, try to pinpoint the morning I woke up to find her staring back at me, but the hazy memories don't form up right. Something's fucking with my head.

Squinting down at my crotch, I mutter, "Well that's odd," and I'm going to ask the whore if she thinks my dick is big, and whether or not she sees a blister on it, but then the ceiling spins and opens up into a frightening black sky.

I decide to close my eyes.

\*

On a Wednesday I walk into the psychiatrist's office. The

usual smell of sweet wood shavings and old feces - reminds me of a pet store - is thick in the lobby like an invisible cloud.

The receptionist with the dumpy ass and the ring of fat around her belt stares at me from behind the desk. She slides open the glass partition with an arched brow. There's a candle burning next to her. When I lean forward to talk, the slight heat radiates onto my arms.

"Reilly Reynolds," I tell her. "Two-thirty appointment."

She makes a check on her clipboard and tells me to take a seat.

It's a tiny waiting area, dim and hard to breathe in. I need a gas mask to protect me from the fumes that rise from the excrements of hate and fear left to linger by the people that were here before me. The chair I find is padded and covered with rough, woven wool. There's a wooden board under the fabric that hurts my ass, right up into my tail bone. Cheap, generic artwork - sail boats and golf courses - hangs on the walls.

I watch the other people in the room and wonder if they're as crazy as I know I am.

A fly lands on my leg. I try to skewer it with a pencil but it moves at the last second, and I end up stabbing the lead through my khakis and into the fatty flesh of my thigh. Swearing quietly, I put the blood-tipped pencil back into my pocket.

The Devil is real, and he knows my name.

"Reilly?" Dr. Clance calls with a smile. I look up at her, try and fail to force a smile. "How are you today?" she asks as we walk to her office. She's a short black woman, older than me, wearing navy slacks and a checkered blouse. Her slick hair is pulled back in a tight bun.

"I'm okay," I tell her.

Her office is crowded with books. The walls are decorated with posters that read things like "It will be okay," and, "Tomorrow is a new day." We sit facing each other - me on a love seat, her in a

black executive-style desk chair.

"What happened to your leg?" she asks.

"Nothing."

"It's bleeding."

"No it's not."

"Okay." She scans her notes. "How's everything going? Still feeling the depression?"

"Yes."

"The meds don't seem to be helping?"

"Maybe a little."

"Have you had any more incidents?"

"Manic episodes?" I ask. "You mean manic episodes, right? Isn't that what you call them?"

"Yes."

"Not lately."

"Good. No more attacking random people?"

"No." I scratch at my beard. "Not since that kid."

"How's he doing?"

"Good, good. He got out of the hospital last week."

"Excellent. That means the anti-psychotics are working."

She gets up and walks to her desk, picks up a booklet then returns to her chair. Sunlight coming through the window behind her hurts my eyes.

"Have you thought anymore of hurting yourself?"

"No," I answer automatically. Tell them yes and they send you to the bad hospital with the nice name and the hallways filled with screams.

"Well, how would you say you feel overall? If you had to sum it up."

"I'm so unhappy I can barely make it through the day. Everything I see and everything I do are just pointless actions of denial. I feel like I am all the depravity and all the unhappiness in the

world condensed into a single human form. I feel like I'm the shit stain on the bathroom wall of the world that everyone sees but tries to ignore. You know, in the hope that someone else, anyone else, will come and clean it up."

Her brow goes up. "That's a pretty grim outlook. I'm not ignoring you, am I?"

Shrug. "I pay you."

"Fair enough. I bet you feel very confused, don't you?"

"No. The opposite. I feel like I understand everything perfectly and that's what makes me so incredibly unhappy."

"Why do you think you feel that way?"

"Chemical imbalances? Maybe life is just wearing me down, killing whatever it is that lives inside and controls me."

"You mean your soul," she says.

"Okay."

"Can you give me an example?"

"Example of what?"

"Something that wears you down."

"College," I say immediately. "College is a fucking waste. I've been there for years and I'm not really learning anything. I don't even know why I'm there anymore."

"Then why are you?"

"So I don't have to deal with the real world, I guess. Or something like that...fear, maybe. And because without that piece of paper, that goddam diploma, I'm not worth shit in other people's eyes. It's like I'm just buying a piece of paper so I'll be accepted by everyone else and keep up this illusion of normalcy."

She remains silent, jotting down notes between encouraging glances.

"I guess I'm disillusioned," I continue. "Nothing is ever what I hope it will be. Everyone told me that college is this utopia of free thinking and acceptance, but it's not. That's a fucking lie. The



people there are just as close minded and bigoted as the rest of the world. If anything, it's worse, because the college people try to pretend they're not."

"I think college is very accepting."

"Jesus. How can you say that? Do you really believe that?" I ask.

I go on to tell her about the class I had in rhetoric a couple semesters ago, the class with the hyper-liberal lesbo professor who was always criticizing the government. I tell Dr. Clance how our class started getting death threats, how students or teachers or some crazy assholes actually wanted to kill us over meaningless bullshit sessions in a classroom. How there were only eight of us in that course. Eight students and a teacher, and how that frightened someone enough to threaten our lives. I tell her how we had to have campus police escort us from the class to our cars for weeks, and how insane it all was.

"What does that say about my school?" I ask her when the story's finished. "What does that say about this country? What does that say about humanity?" I stop for breath and cross my legs, pick at a scuff on the toe of my Topsiders.

"That's hard to believe," she says.

"Only because you've convinced yourself to believe that this illusion of freedom – free speech, free actions, whatever – is real." I look her in the eye for the first time. "It's not."

"Now you sound like a conspiracy theorist."

"Why? What I'm talking about are simple observations gathered and combined to form a logical conclusion – the conclusion that life sucks and there's no point trying to change anything. At least I understand that it's just my personal opinion and I don't try to force it down other people's throats."

She squints at me, as if she's looking at something deep inside. "Have you been having more of the delusions you were telling

about, Reilly?”

Feign surprise. “Of course not,” I lie.

“Because someone as creative as you - when someone like you suffers from the conditions you’ve been diagnosed with, they can start to build up fantasies in their minds. Complex delusions. Intricate, convincing tricks of the brain. You’ve had nothing like that?”

I laugh and play with the pleats of my pants. My leg throbs. I wait a moment before answering. “No. Nothing like that.”

“Are you still hearing things other people don’t hear? Seeing things other people don’t see?”

“I don’t know.” I give her a shrug. “How could I know? If I see it, it’s there. I don’t go around asking people to double check me all the time.”

“Alright. Well, I want you to watch out for anything like that, anything you see that you find out isn’t real. Write it down and call and tell me.”

“Okay.”

“For now, I think we should bump up your medications a little. Have you been having any bad effects from them? Any reason to change them?”

Inside, I smile. “No. I don’t think so.”

She rips pages out of her prescription pad and hands me the stack. “Let’s try this and see if you feel any better.”

“Great,” I mutter. “Thanks a lot.”

I stop at the receptionist on my way out and hand her the check for two-hundred dollars, then head for the pharmacy.

Staring at the row of assorted plastic bottles, I sort the colorful pills with my finger. Rave blue, eel green, bone white, and my favorite - a big strawberry tab speckled with little tan spots. I swallow them, one by one, with sugary opium tea.

Zoloft (200mg), Xanax (1mg), Strattera (80mg), Adderall (40mg), Lithium (160mg), Abilify (10mg).

The pills fill my stomach. I can feel them tumbling in the acid as they slowly dissolve and fuel my blood.

Whatever soul may once have lived inside me has molted from this body and moved on. I function through the days like an old wristwatch ticking through well rehearsed motions, winding myself up each morning with this regimented onslaught of prescription drugs.

Often now, I find myself questioning whether I'm asleep or awake. I live disconnected from morals or worries - even pleasure is hard to find. I know and accept that I'm the worst kind of person.

The acceptance brings no relief.

\*

When I open the door, Melanie is standing there. Her hair has been dyed pink. She smiles up at me. I'm not sure what to say.

"Your goddam hair's pink."

"Do you like it?" she asks, and steps inside.

"No, not really."

"Fuck you, then."

She hugs me, her head barely reaching my shoulders. Hot breath blows on my chest as the smell of strawberry shampoo gets in my nose. I can feel her stiff nipples through the thin cashmere sweater she's wearing.

"Actually," I lie to her, "It's kind of sexy."

"Thanks." She smiles and shows straight, bright teeth. She seems pleased. "Where you been?"

“Running. It’s good for me. Flushes the toxins and releases endorphins.”

“Have you eaten yet?” she asks.

“No.”

I cook us thick bloody hamburgers and we take shots of whiskey, enjoying the smell of the meat frying in the pan. When we eat, she puts too much ketchup on her burger and the thick red slush mixes with grease and drips down her chin. I laugh and give her a napkin.

Finished with the food, we each take a Xanax, then retire to the living room. I sit back in my chair. She lies on the carpet, points her arm straight up, and uses her fingers to trace phantom images on the ceiling.

I close my eyes and try to imagine what happiness feels like, then fantasize about being a bear.

There’s a dead spot on my back, almost at the base of my spine. It’s numb most of the time, but every once and awhile there’s a tingle followed by the sensation of hundreds of pounds of pressure pushing down on that one little spot. It’s tingling now.

Melanie gets up and walks over. She grabs my hand and pulls me to my feet.

“Let’s go upstairs,” she says.

“Okay.”

Afterward, we lie next to each other without speaking. A giraffe is humming the tune of Dixie from somewhere unseen. I turn on a John Prine album. The music relaxes me, distracts me.

“My life is a waste,” Melanie says.

“Was it really that bad?”

“You know what I mean.”

I do, and say, “That’s what drugs are for.”

“That’s pathetic.”

“That’s life. My life. Makes yours look good in comparison, I guess.”

“There has to be some point to it, some greater purpose.”

“You could always try to justify your existence with a belief in some imaginary higher power,” I tell her. “I hear disillusionment works wonders.”

“That’s crap.”

“Yeah, probably.”

I light a joint and we pass it back and forth. The red ember glows in the dark.

“You just have to accept that we are mean, selfish creatures living insignificant lives,” I say. “The best we can hope for is some kind of control over our destinies.”

“I just...I just need to know that it’s all for something.”

“You’re born, you suffer, you die. If something nice happens in between, consider yourself lucky.”

“You don’t think that’s what life is?” she asks. “The nice stuff in between?”

“If you can make yourself believe that, then it is.”

Even in the darkness, her body looks tan. Her legs are short, muscular, and defined. My gut looks pregnant, my skin as white as the moonlight trickling through the window. There’s a scar next to my belly button, an old memento from a knife fight with a homeless man on the Marta train.

“Then it’s all just a waste,” she says. “There’s no point.”

“All that matters is what you do while you’re alive. When you die, it’s over. If you live for death, your life is wasted. You can do anything you want. Right now. You’re free. Think of how incredible that is. There’s no right or wrong. Live. Never let yourself fall into those bland religious traps. I think I’d rather be ripped apart by wild lions than die old and safe with delusions of heaven.

“You have to accept your own worthlessness in order to live,” I continue. “You are not significant. Nothing you will ever do will be significant.”

“How can you live like that?” she asks.

“Because it’s true. Once you know the truth, there’s no other honest way.”

“Well if nothing matters, why not kill anyone who disagrees with you? Why not just rape any woman you want?” She rolls onto her elbow to face me and props up her head. “You’re talking like a nihilist.”

“Why? Why would I want to? Everyone’s entitled to their own shot at happiness. I have no desire to interfere with that. I have no right to interfere with that. I treat others like I want them to treat me. Don’t you remember that rule from kindergarten?”

“That doesn’t work in the real world.”

“Works for me.”

“But you’re the most unhappy person I know.”

“That doesn’t mean what I’m saying is any less true. It just means I’m an unhappy person. I know what I should do and I choose not to. I choose self-destruction. I choose to waste my existence.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It just seems right. I don’t believe in destiny, but somehow I feel that this is the right thing for me to do. To give up on happiness and embrace the misery and the depravity.”

“Still - how can you live like that?”

“Drugs help, even if just for little bits of time. They bring happiness, euphoria. I’ve heard people say that it’s not real happiness, but what is? Only feelings are real.” Melanie sighs. I go on. “I think drugs are the real God,” I tell her. “If that’s true it means I can capture God in a bottle, a line, or a needle. I like that thought.”

“You might as well kill yourself.”

I stub the joint into the clay ashtray between us. "I think about that everyday of my life."

"What about love? Love's something to hope for."

"Love is the worst kind of bullshit."

"Have you ever loved anyone?" she asks.

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"She left."

"Why?"

"I guess she didn't love me anymore."

"Do you love me?"

There's a nickel sized bruise on her ass. I poke it with my finger.

"I don't know," I tell her. "No. I don't think I ever want to be in love again."

"That's ridiculous. You're only twenty-six."

"What does that matter?"

"You're too young to say something that definitive. You probably don't even know what love is."

"I think I do. That's enough for me."

"But what if what you felt before wasn't real love?" she asks. "What if you just thought it was because you didn't know any better."

"It was real. It was love."

"What did she do to you?" Melanie asks quietly.

It's my turn to sigh. "She just...stopped loving me. That was enough. I never want to hurt like that again."

"You can't just give up because one relationship didn't work out. You'll be missing out on life. It's pathetic."

"It's enough for me," I tell her.

"That's so stupid, Reilly. You're so stupid. You're an idiot."

I light another joint.

Last night, aiming at suicide, I swallowed an excessive amount of drugs; a combination of Methadone tablets, Percocets, and Xanax. Instead of sleeping myself to death, I spent the night sweating and eating thick crust pizza while wearing nothing except my Winnie the Pooh slippers and a Red Army officer's cap. I tried to masturbate, but my cock had no feeling and played dead. I smashed my hand with a hammer just to feel something.

Coffee is black and best served hot. The devil lives in Tasmania. Sometimes, when people ask me simple questions, I pretend not to know the answers. The sky is red and my teeth are bleeding, but tomorrow will be worse.

I am the anti-man. My name is Reilly Reynolds and I want to die.

\*

I go to a party at one of the big white houses on Greek Row. There's a band playing, and I wander among the crowd with a bottle of gin, smoking a joint and screaming "Do you have cocaine?"

Everyone says no and offers to buy some from me if I can find it. A girl in a pink shirt approaches and flirts with me while touching my arm. I'm too nervous and turned off by her eagerness, so I tell her to leave me alone.

I climb the stairs and walk down the halls. Kicking open bedroom doors, I find drinking, smoking, and fucking – but no coke. In one room, a huge drunken beast charges me, enraged that I've barged into his room and woken him from near-inebriated slumber. I smoke a joint with him to avoid personal bodily harm.

Frustrated, I finally call Rich. He brings me an ounce of



powder and some digital scales.

I make base in the big beast's room. He's high now, and appeased. He says his name is Matt. When I tell him my plans, he laughs and invites me to move the drugs from his room.

I begin selling grams of the cocaine for sixty dollars, with no price reduction for quantity. Once everyone at the party's had a taste of the product, I raise the price to seventy-five. They keep coming back, faster than before. A greasy man with black fingernails trades me for some heroin. I quickly put it up my nose and the night gets better.

A girl sucks my dick but I'm too geeked up for anything to work down there. She finally gets bored and passes out next to me on the couch. Just before six in the morning, a man, older than me, with bloodshot eyes and the stink of liquor - shaking, near death - enters the room with a handful of coins and dumps a clatter of quarters onto the glass coffee table.

He begs "I've got \$3.25, man. Hook me up with a line. Please."

I laugh and tell him to bring me money, paper money. He starts to cry and lays on the floor near my feet. Matt comes back - he left earlier, saying something about a girl - and tells me that he's going to bed and that I need to leave.

I drive home, bang my head against the seat of a wooden chair thirty-seven times, then sleep for twenty hours.

I am grim black evil masquerading in the skin of a man.

\*

Cold fluorescent light is burning my eyes. They water as my leg twitches with nervous energy. I finish reading and look up at

class, grouped in a half-circle around the room.

"That was really funny," says a middle-aged woman - dumpy with a bad bleach job. "You should write for Saturday Night Live."

You're an ignorant cunt, I think, pleased, and say, "Thanks."

"Was it really Jesus?" This from a brunette with huge tits and quarter sized nipples that poke against the fabric of her shirt.

"I dunno," I say.

"Of course it wasn't Jesus," the dumpy woman, Wanda, is speaking again. "That man was using drugs. Jesus would never take drugs."

Her voice bounces against the speckled tile floor, echoes off the white-painted cinder walls. She's sitting in a plastic blue chair. I fantasize that one of its thin metal legs will snap, sending her fat ass slamming to the ground.

I blink. They're all staring at me.

"It's ambiguous," I say.

"I think it's great," says a tiny young woman still dressed in cotton pajamas.

I wonder what her vagina looks like beneath the pajamas . Shaved completely? Maybe just trimmed into some exotic shape like a heart.

Outside the window, two panda bears are fornicating violently on the sidewalk. I try to remember the last time I ate LSD.

The professor - short, bald, with a tuft of brown hair under his lip that reminds me of a shit stain - begins criticizing what I've just read. I only half listen.

Why should I care about what this man thinks? He once told me, while we smoked marijuana from my tall glass bong, that he has been working on a novel for twelve years, yet still doesn't have a title.

"... you're telling too much," the professor's saying. "I want you to show."

“But I’m telling a story.”

“Show, Reilly, show. Like a movie.”

“It’s not a movie,” I reply, anger working up through my glass-eyed Lortab haze. “It’s literature. It’s supposed to be superior to movies and all that Hollywood bullshit.”

“Well, then at least try to be poetic. Your writing is too vague, too raw.”

“But life is vague. And raw. It’s just a series of random nightmares. And I don’t have time for poetry.”

He answers something, but now I’m really not listening. I know what this pathetic, babbling PhD scored on his SATs - 720 - and I assume he must have misspelled his name.

I want to scream curses and strip naked, explain to everyone in this shitty classroom that we should all give up because none of us will ever make any difference in the world after we’re dead.

Instead, my stomach revolts and my throat begins to siphon. The room shrinks. I spew blood-laced vomit all over the long table. The smell is strong with acid.

“I quit,” I tell them, wiping my mouth, then leave the room.

No one objects or even speaks, but I slam the thick wood door behind me anyway and throw my portfolio - which holds everything I’ve written these past seven years - into the first trash can I see while picking chunks of vomit from my beard and whispering, “I am the anti-man.”

Outside, the July sun is hot and high, the air so humid that breathing comes hard and thick. I squint while fumbling for my mirrored aviators.

There are only a few dozen summer school students wandering around the campus. A few stare at me, raise their eyebrows at the vomit decorating my shirt. I belch loudly, little traces of bile coming up into the back of my throat.

My stomach feels better already.

I head back to the apartment in my forest green Audi, crack the window after lighting a joint. My parents bought me a house outside of town, but I use my own money to rent an apartment near campus. The last stanzas of The Band's King Harvest fill the car.

Pulling into the apartment complex, I click the roach out the window onto the hot red pavement. The bizarre red pavement drew me to this place, despite its old worn townhouses that stink of burnt cigarettes and stale, sour paint. The lot looks like a tennis court. For some reason, I find this comforting.

Rich's little blue Honda is parked in front of my building.

As I climb the steep metal stairs up to my door, I can hear voices above. Lee, my neighbor, is sitting with Rich on the old smelly couch we pulled onto the balcony months before.

Lee's body is thin and bent. His leg twitches constantly. His face is pale and drained - dirty with acne, boils, and sweat. His irises are bright blue, but his half-lidded, heroin dead eyes seem to see nothing.

"Can't find anything?" I ask him.

Lee scratches at his arm. "Whole town's dry. I'm staring to hurt. Bad" He wipes snot from him nose with the back of a hand.

He's wearing dark baggy pants and a T-shirt with 'Metallica' ironed on the front in dripping red letters. His copper hair is cropped short, almost to the scalp.

Lee's father has bought him three cars already this year. The BMW was stolen by a friend for the insurance money - used to buy a large quantity of heroine, supposedly imported from France.

The Volvo was totaled when Lee passed out driving down the interstate and crashed into a metal barrier.

The Land Cruiser, the survivor, is in the lot below, parked

beside the truck my father bought me for my sixteenth birthday and the Audi my grandfather gave me as a high school graduation present.

"Come on, I've got some bud we can smoke," I tell him. "It'll help even you out. Maybe."

We go inside. I sit down on the leather couch and begin packing my bong. Richard goes into the kitchen and draws a glass of water from the tap, careful not to wet the black leather driving gloves he's wearing.

"Goddamit, use the filter!" I yell.

He empties the glass and refills it using the capsule shaped Brita.

"It's there for a reason," I tell him. "Who knows what kind of shit is in that goddam city water."

"You're a freak," Richards tells me.

Rich is average when he doesn't speak - average height, average weight, average face, average hair. His one eccentricity is a drawer at his house filled with gloves - wool gloves, leather gloves, cheap gloves, expensive gloves. I've never seen him not wearing a pair. Once, when I asked him why, he told me: "Because mittens are for faggots."

Rich has a speech impediment that causes him to sound British, so Hello comes out 'Ello. Other than that, and his habit of constantly sniffing cocaine, Richard is the most normal person I know.

The lighter clicks once, twice. The flame hits the cannabis and the bong gurgles. I pass it to Lee while exhaling a great white cloud of smoke. Rich sits next to me and pours chunky white powder onto the glass coffee table. He breaks it up with a thin plastic driver's license, then makes it disappear up his nose through a tightly rolled bill. He prepares another line for Lee.

"Reilly," Rich begins. Finished with the second line, he gets

up and starts pacing.

“What?”

“I got to talk to you about something.”

“What?”

“I met this bitch with cerebral palsy a couple weeks ago.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Yes, I did. Fucker. Listen to the damn story. This chick has cerebral palsy and her arm is all curled up and -”

“Which arm?” Lee asks.

“The right one. And she has this real bad stutter so that she can hardly talk.”

“That sucks,” I say.

“Yeah, but look, if she smokes like one good bowl, the stutter gets better and she can use her arm a little.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It’s crazy to watch. Puff, puff - all better. The stutter’s still there a little but it’s pretty much gone afterwards.”

Rich glances at Lee, then to the line of cocaine still untouched on the table. He leans down and snorts it before continuing. “But she has to drive to Atlanta to get the green and even that’s not a regular thing. It’s a big risk, too, you know.” He snuffles.

“Okay.” I clear my throat with a mighty hack and hit the bong again.

“So I told her I knew somebody who could hook her up with some real good shit. Like medicinal shit.”

“You told her that?” I ask him. “Sounds like you kind of committed me without asking. You know that I don’t like to sell in small quantities. It’s nothing but trouble.”

“She’s sick, you asshole.”

“And I appreciate that, but what if she gets arrested and the cops show up at my house and find a hundred fucking marijuana plants growing in my basement?”

"She won't even know who you are. It'll all go through me."

"I don't know..."

"Come on, be a buddy."

I sigh. The THC makes me charitable. "Alright. I'll just give it to her, though. I'm not gonna charge a gimp. Tell her like an ounce a month."

"Thanks, buddy. That's great. This is a good thing for you to do. God's smiling right now." Rich is bouncing on his toes.

"Yeah, that means so much to me."

"Are you trying to fuck this girl?" Lee asks.

"What? No...I mean, so what?"

"Wow. You're trying to fuck a girl with cerebral palsy, you yakked out mother fucker."

"So what? She's hot, you fucking bigot."

"Is it like a fetish thing for you?" I ask.

"No! Fuck you, asshole. That's goddam offensive. She's attractive, and smart, and -"

"And you want to stick your dick in her while she b-b-begs you for it," Lee laughs.

"Exactly."

"You could have just said that you needed drugs to fuck a girl," I tell him. "There's no shame in that."

"It really does help her, though."

"Alright. Whatever."

"You know medical marijuana is biblical," Lee says absently, rubbing the withered muscles in his arm.

"In the bible?" I ask.

"Not in the bible, but it's been around since biblical times."

"I think the definition of biblical is 'in the bible'," I tell him.

"No, it's something that pertains to the bible and bible times, asshole, but the point is Jesus used cannabis to heal people. I read about it."

"Bullshit," Rich says. "Junkies don't read."

"No, really. Recent archaeological evidence suggests that the balms Jesus used to heal the sick were olive oil mixed with an ancient form of cannabis. That's why it made them feel better."

"You're like the Aristotle of heroin addicts," Rich says.

"That's pretty goddam interesting," I admit.

"That's why I find it so hypocritical that our government, which is based on Christian values, has decided to outlaw and vilify a plant that Christ himself approved of and used."

"Thanks, for sharing that," I mumble.

Lee leans forward in the chair, pauses, then dry heaves thin strands of vomit onto the carpet.

"Shit! Go outside to do that shit!"

"Sorry," he gasps. "I'm hurting. I'm sick. I think I'm gonna die."

Rich stops pacing and sits down next to me. "Fucking junkie," he says and snorts another line of cocaine.

"I'm dying," Lee mutters over and over.

"Goddammit. I've got some methadone I was going to take tonight," I tell him. "I guess you can have it."

Lee's head snaps up. "Please. Please let me have it." He starts rifling through his pockets, pulling out wrinkled bills.

I open one of the drawers in the coffee table, take out the pills inside, and hand three to Lee. He snatches them. I swallow the other two.

"You're a fucking God," he says and stumbles out the door.

Sounds of banging and crashing come through the thin wall that separates our apartments. Lee returns, sniffing. "I can't find a needle. Fuck, fuck, fuck."

He takes a steak knife from the kitchen and begins to chop up the pills.

"Just chew them up," I tell him.



"I'm gonna snort them. Send 'em straight to my brain."

"Just chew them!" I insist. "It's the same as snorting them."

"Nah, this sends them straight to my brain." He takes the rolled-up bill from Rich and vacuums the pile of powdered opiates.

"Have you ever looked at an anatomy diagram, you moron?"

I ask him. "Your nasal cavity doesn't connect to your brain. The powder just drips down your throat into your stomach."

"Actually, it's absorbed by the membranes in your nose," Rich says. "So it does hit you a little faster."

Rich and I watch Lee. He's leaning back in the chair, eyes closed, waiting for the drug to work.

"Let's get drunk," I say.

Lee brings over Coronas from next door. The bottles are warm, the beer skunky in my mouth.

"Warm beer?" I ask. "Only sociopaths drink warm beer."

"Shut up." Lee has a little smile on his face now.

I ditch the beer and search desperately for whiskey. Finding a half-empty bottle, I take a slug before speaking again. "I quit school today. I walked out and I'm never going back."

"Dumbass," Rich says.

"I couldn't take it anymore. It's too pointless."

"How will you get a job?" Lee asks, softly, as he studies the wrinkles in the front of his shirt.

"Who cares?"

"You should, asshole," Rich tells me. "That's like eight years of your life wasted."

"I don't care about things like that anymore." I hold the whiskey to my lips and let the fire fill my mouth. "I don't think I care about anything anymore."

"That sounds healthy," Rich laughs.

"Oh well," I say. "I don't care about healthiness either."

"Then why go to that shrink?"

"For the drugs."

They both nod, understanding.

We pass the bottle back and forth in silence while Rich does a few more lines.

Leaning back and sniffing, he tells me, "I saw Lisa yesterday."

I nod, hold up the bottle and drain it. "I hate my life," I tell them. "I quit."

\*

"You sure about this?" I ask Lee again as I put the car into park.

"I told you - it's fine. I deal with this guy all the time." His leg is shaking hard enough to rock the car. His fists are clenched white and bloodless.

The fake brick siding that's plastered on the front of the apartment is sun bleached to the shade of old salmon. The metal door is painted a peeling dirt brown. It's August, but the rows of shrubs are just a tangle of leafless, dead twigs. When Lee knocks, the sound bounces through the empty parking lot as if we're inside a deep canyon.

"Come in!"

Through the doorway, there's a sharp smell of burnt chemicals and rotten melon. It's dark. I can't see any furniture, but can just make out a small mound of mattress and blankets in the corner.

A voice calls out, "Who's your friend?"

"This is Reilly," Lee says.

There's a man on the mattress, hidden among the blankets. He's withered and curled. His face comes to a point at the chin.

His cheeks are scarred with acne. All he's wearing is a lumpy diaper that's leaking thin, liquid shit. The mattress is stained around him in big yellow blotches.

"What happened to you?" I ask him.

"I'm a quadriplegic, asshole."

I nod my head and look around the room. "How come you don't have any furniture?"

"Why do you think?"

"Oh yeah."

"You get the pills?" Lee cuts in. He's twitchy, impatient.

"Yeah," the man says. "The nurse brought them today. But how 'bout you help me out first and give me a hit."

Lee kneels down and takes a small glass pipe from beside the mattress. He drops in a white rock from the baggie next to it and lights it while holding the pipe to the man's mouth. The cripple's eyes widen and his head spasms a couple times.

"Were you born like this?" I ask as they burn another rock.

He holds in the smoke for a moment, then answers as it curls from his mouth. "Nah, I was a Marine in Iraq. We got into a firefight outside Fallujah and some stray shrapnel caught me in the spine."

"Shit."

"Here's the money," Lee tells him, counting the bills near the man's face.

"Alright. Pills are in the bathroom."

Lee, still busy with the gimp and the crack, nods to me.

I walk into the immaculate bathroom - I guess it doesn't get much use - and find the prescription bottle on the counter by the sink. A Purple Heart lies near it, on top of a pile of medical cards, some military forms, and a thin, beige bar of soap.

"Goddam," I call over my shoulder, picking up the medal.

"This is cool. I've never seen one of these in real life."

Back in the living room, the pills safe in my pocket, I ask: "So you glad you went over there?"

The man's face crunches with ridicule. "Are you fucking serious? I'm paralyzed from the neck down. Forever."

"You got a Purple Heart, though. That's pretty fucking cool. You got my respect."

"It's a few inches of ribbon and a hunk of shitty metal," he says. "And your respect don't mean dick to me. I'll sell that thing to you for a hundred bucks."

"Really?"

"Yeah, hundred bucks. Come on, I need the cash."

I think about it, say, "No thanks."

"Come on, guy. Help me out!" His head reaches up from his dead body - reminds me of a turtle.

"I don't think so."

"Alright..." He seems disappointed.

"I bet you're a man who could really use a good whore," I say.

"No point. Can't feel anything down there. Wouldn't even know if I came."

"That's the most depressing thing I've ever heard," I tell him as Lee heads for the door.

The man shrugs, "Life's a lonely game that you play by yourself."

He turns his head away from me and stares at the wall. His frozen little body looks pitiful down there on the mattress.

Back in the car, I start the engine and let out a breath. Little Feat blares through the speakers.

"You brought me to a quadriplegic crack head's house," I say.

Lee laughs, jingling the bottle of pills. "Yeah."

"Jesus. That was really fucked up."

"He sells me the Oxycontin cheap, though. He's so desperate

for someone to come give him a couple hits of crack.”

I throw two of the painkillers into my mouth and chew them up, put the Audi in reverse and say, “Let’s get the fuck out of here. This place depresses the hell out of me.”

\*

My house, the house my parents bought me years ago when I still showed promise, sits alone on fifteen acres of flat, pine green land. The driveway is long and cuts through the trees as it passes a tiny lake - maybe just a big pond - before it runs into the two-story wood sided home with the wrap around balcony and elevated deck.

The trees are cleared away on every side, and we keep the grass mowed down in the summer with a rusty old Snapper. I’ve named the house Herbie Bellows in the British tradition.

The sky is melting sea green as I barrel down the gravel driveway. From the edges of my vision, I can see brown clad Russian spies darting among the trees. They must want something from me, probably my brain, maybe just my hair - it’s long and blond, just the sort of thing the KGB would covet. I haven’t slept in five, no, six days.

The dogs hear the gravel crunch and groan under the big tires of my truck. They break from the tree line in long, leaping strides.

Blue is a black lab and Fred is a little brown and white hound. Lucy is a tan greyhound I saved from euthanasia when she grew too old to race the tracks.

“There they are,” I coo, opening the truck door and taking their heads between my hands and rubbing their ears. The dogs use their shoulders to bump each other and work for the position closest to me. Their hair sheds from the heat and clings to my hands.

“There’s my good dogs. Y’all been good?” I take a handful of treats from the truck and toss them out in rotation.

Paul comes out onto the porch and throws up an arm. “What say, boss man?”

He’s tall, near six and a half feet, with a neck that disappears into his shoulders. The lid under his left eye hangs low and pink, crying constantly so that he has to carry a linen kerchief to dab the tears. When Paul asked if he could move in with me, I quickly agreed, as I’ve found that, being an asshole, it’s wise to keep large friends around me for protection.

Paul is a bi-sexual sadomasochist. His dates usually leave the house with dark bruises and rope burns. One early morning, while I lay on the couch near comatose from too much heroin, a man came down the stairs weeping. His hands were deep in his pockets and little pink cigarette burns laced his arms. He saw me watching him and avoided my eyes, then silently left the house.

It depressed me.

Paul and I go into the house, followed closely by the dogs. The metallic jangle of their tags sounds like loose change.

Inside, the floors are all hardwood, upstairs and down. There’s a big wrap around couch I bought from Goodwill, and a few chairs, most of them from garage sales and second hand stores. The walls are covered with my art - abstract paintings and colorful sketches that are the products of long nights on speed. There’s dog hair everywhere, on everything, as neither Paul nor I like to clean.

The day he moved in, Paul nailed up a wooden crucifix with a weeping Jesus hanging on it. I left it up. It’s nice to be reminded that even the best of us suffer.

I fall onto the couch. Paul sits in the recliner. Fred jumps up next to me and Lucy pokes me with her nose, leaving a cold wet spot on my arm that I wipe off on my jeans.

“You alright?” Paul asks.

“Same as always. How’re things here?”

“Blue’s been throwing up.”

“Godammit.”

I call her over and check her eyes. She stares up at me with a brown-eyed gaze and pants stinky breath into my face through her plaque toothed smile.

“You alright, baby girl?” I ask her. “You sick?” To Paul: “I’ll take her to the vet this week.”

“Alright,” Paul says. Then, “Damn mold’s been hittin’ all the plants I used that Super Bud Booster on. They’re just too fucking dense.”

I take a joint from a box on the coffee table. “I heard that can happen. It’s alright. Next time I’ll add some silicon to balance it out. We might be able to save those moldy plants for honey oil, though, so keep them isolated from the others.”

The basement below us is divided into three parts.

The walls of the grow room are lined in reflective Mylar. Four one-thousand watt high-pressure sodium lights and four one-thousand watt metal-halide lights hang above the short bushy plants. This room is subdivided into two smaller rooms - one that gets twenty-four hours of light, the other a twelve/twelve light/dark cycle.

The next room in the basement is completely dark. It houses the drying marijuana and the terrariums where the mushrooms grow.

The last room is a big storage area lit with halogen bulbs and filled with chemicals and soils.

There’s a baby gate at the top of the stairs to keep the dogs out.

Paul drives pounds of the dried marijuana around the South, distributing it to our friends at colleges in Tennessee, South Carolina, and Mississippi. Business is good.

Business is always good.

I smoke the joint while watching television and petting the dogs. Paul works at rolling a blunt. We have surround sound, and occasionally I'm startled by footsteps creeping up behind me. I whip around each time and Paul laughs.

"I quit school today," I say for the second time in a few hours. "And life."

He's lit the blunt now, and passes it to me.

"I'm surprised you lasted as long as you did."

"Thanks. I'm seriously debating suicide," I purposely fail to mention my earlier, unsuccessful attempt.

"Yeah...you should probably hold off on that."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I like having you around. If you weren't here I'd have no place to live."

"I'm miserable almost every moment of everyday. Why should I be alive?"

"Maybe things will get better."

"I doubt that. They never have."

"You never know, something could change."

"People always say a tragic event changes a person - something cruel or terrifying or gruesome - but those kinds of things happen to me all the time, and I just stay the same."

"I really don't know what you want me to say, Reilly. Just don't kill yourself."

"Yeah. Thanks."

"Shoot up a bunch of heroin or eat a shit load of mushrooms. Get as close to death as possible. Get it out of your system."

"I already tried that. It didn't work."

Occasionally, I pause during insignificant things that occur throughout my days - stubbing my toe, spilling shampoo on a tile floor, turning on a gas burner - and time slows as I wonder if this



action will begin a series of events that will ultimately climax in some bizarre death.

So far, nothing has.

That night I go to the bar. The lights are dim, and the music - some pop shit I've never heard before - is so loud that everyone has to scream at each other to be heard. The air is hot, full of pheromones and cigarette smoke. I sit on a stool and drink rum with ice until the world becomes manageable. A beetle keeps running laps on the back of my neck, but no matter how much I swat at it, the damn thing won't go away.

"You see that Braves game?" the bartender screams at me as he scuttles around behind the counter pouring drinks.

I ignore him and turn to watch the crowd. A woman with long, curly hair stands out as she shuffles around the floor. She's tall and too thin, with small breasts and small feet. When I notice that she has gray eyes, my dick starts to move around in my pants.

"Hey!" I yell when she comes to the bar for a drink.

She looks me over and nods.

"What's your name?" I yell.

"April!"

"Oh yeah? That's a month, too, isn't it?"

She gives me that look I'm used to, the one that says I'm an idiot. "Yeah!"

"Is that what you're named after? The month?"

She's looking at something behind me. "I guess!" she shouts.

"I've got drugs! Back at my place! And a huge cock! It'll probably tear you in half, you skinny bitch!"

"What kind of drugs?" she yells.

"Marijuana! Cocaine!"

"Do you eat?"

"Eat what?"

“Pussy!”

“Oh! Yeah, all the time!”

“Okay! Let’s go!”

I smile, grab her arm and lead her to the parking lot.

“Get your car and follow me,” I tell her.

“What?”

“Get your car and follow me.”

I unlock the Audi with a chirp. April’s wearing a thin green dress with a low-cut bust. It blows against her, outlining her legs.

“Really?” she asks. “Most guys like to ride together.”

“Not me.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to have to drive you home later. I’m not a fucking chauffeur. Now get your car.”

“Okay. What’s your name?”

“Reilly.”

Back at the house, my bedroom door’s locked. I can hear grunts, wet sucking sounds, and slaps through the cheap wood.

“What the fuck,” I yell, banging on the door. “Paul, you better not be fucking on my bed, you droopy eyed fuck!”

I turn to April and smile, shrug.

“Gimme a minute,” Paul calls back.

“Fuck you!”

I seat April on the couch and plop down next to her.

“You see that Braves game?” I use the bartender’s words while breaking out lines of white powder on a small mirror.

“Um, no,” April says.

“Me neither.”

There’s half an ounce of cocaine in little rows on the mirror now.

“You like dogs?” I ask.

“Sure, I guess.”

“Come ‘ere, Fred!” I scream.

He comes sliding into the room on the slick floor and leaps into my lap. His front paws catch the mirror and flip it through the air. A little white cloud hovers, then falls and settles on the rug and the dog.

“Fuck!” I screech. “God no! Why, Jesus? Why?”

The little wooden man on the wall doesn’t answer.

I fall to my knees and use my fingertips to try to pull the fine powder from the threads of the carpet. Fred runs around me, frosted like a donut, baying and hopping on his hind legs.

“Gimme the straw!” I yell at April.

“What?”

“Gimme the mother fucking straw!”

I hold Fred down and use the little plastic tube to vacuum his back. I can feel hair, fleas, and little flakes of dander get sucked up with the drug. It all sticks in my nasal passage, but the back of my throat goes numb and I know the drug’s working. After a few minutes, I hand April the straw.

“Your turn.”

“I’m not going to sniff coke off your dog.” She’s looking at me with disgust.

“Then do it off the rug!” I roar. “We’re not wasting this!”

My bedroom door flies open and a naked woman runs out. Her fingers are buried in her vagina, scooping out clear white mucus. She mutters, “Fuck” over and over until she disappears into the bathroom and slams the door.

Silence for a moment, then: “Well. Don’t see that everyday,” I say, turning to April.

Paul follows the woman out. He’s naked too, except for a black leather mask that has a zipper where the mouth should be.

There are red lashes all over his chest and back. He waves his

arms and makes muffled grunts.

"What?" I ask.

He unzips his mouth.

"The goddam condom broke!"

"Oh," I look at April and shrug. "That sucks."

"Fuck, man!" Paul screams. "I can't get this bitch pregnant!"

"It looked like she was doing a pretty thorough job of ridding herself of your...seed," I tell him. "Her fingers were really up there."

"Don't underestimate my boys, man! I just shot a million swimming ninjas up her twat!"

"Oh well." I gesture to the cocaine on the carpet. "I've kinda got my own problem here, guy."

Paul's pacing back and forth. Fred wiggles free and runs into my bedroom.

"I can't have a little Paul running around, man!" He's near tears. "I'm not ready for that shit."

"Get an abortion then," I say. "If she's even pregnant."

April stands and slips her purse over a shoulder.

"I have to go," she says and heads to the door.

"No! Wait!" I cry to her back. "We don't have to worry about condoms! I never even use those things!"

The door rattles the house when she slams it closed.

"That didn't even make sense," Paul says. He pulls off the hood. His hair is sweaty wet and matted. "If you don't use a condom, you'll have the same problem. She'll get pregnant."

I stare at him. "I'm horny, you ass. Don't over think it."

"Fuck. What am I gonna do?" he asks.

"You just cost me pussy, shithead. I don't care what the fuck you do. That girl was good to go!"

"Fuck that. I just got a girl pregnant."

I throw him one of the little decorative pillows from the couch.

“Cover your dick. I don’t need to see that much cock right now.”

I take the straw and start working on the rug. “Why were you in my room anyway,” I ask, from my knees, sniffing.

“Your shit’s nicer. I thought it would impress her.”

“Well now I have to burn my sheets. If I could, I’d beat your ass for that. That’s not cool at all. Don’t do that again. Is that condom still in there? No, Fred! Put that down! Drop it!”

“I got it,” Paul says, wrestling the slimy rubber from the dog’s mouth. “Worthless latex shit.”

“Fred,” I call. “Come here, buddy! Daddy needs to clean you up.”

\*

It’s Tuesday, and my phone tells me I have twenty-seven missed calls. I’ve just finished vomiting blood. Now, I’m in the shower rubbing my skin clean and raw with a bar of green tea soap. After the soap comes a deep cleaning Vitamin C body scrub that contains blue ex-foliating beads.

I use the tips of my fingers to grind the cream into the valleys around the base of my nose where grease and dirt collects in horrifying black pores. The citrus aroma hits my nose and the back of my throat fills with the bitter taste of artificial fruit.

My shampoo, also labeled deep cleaning, is worked into my hair and allowed to set for the count of sixty in the hope that the extended time will maximize the leeching of grime from the blond follicles. I’m having a bad day, so I slather my face with a glycerin-heavy sea kelp mask that burns so strongly my nose begins to run.

The five minute wait until I can rinse it off is maddening. I

distract myself by scrubbing all over with a small plastic brush that has stiff white nylon bristles. It draws blood that trickles down and foams on the porcelain floor as it mixes with the jets of hot water shooting from the stainless steel shower head.

Thick steam condenses on my back as I dry off with a fluffy white towel. I slip on a pair of blue, yellow, and red striped pajama bottoms that have a rip in the waist band where I've torn the tag off.

I use my palm to wipe clean a hazy strip of mirror and, to my blurred reflection, whisper, "I am the anti-man and I hate myself," while thinking of Amanda, who is Stephen Summers fiancée, and how, last night, high on speed, she begged me to fuck her up the ass but cried and screamed for me to stop before my dick was even a quarter of the way inside her.

Midnight comes. Fists of madness are pounding at the door.

I find the thick blue vein inside my leg, up near the groin, and carefully push the needle in. I ease down the plunger, slowly allowing the barrel full of liquid ambrosia to swirl into my blood.

The meth throws me back in the chair. My world narrows. My heart races up into my head and beats-beats-beats as fast as it can. White flowers trip lazily in disgust. I can taste the pleasure in my mouth.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes later.

The room is throbbing. I pull the needle from my leg, loosen the rubber tube squeezing into my skin. Energy is everywhere, building up inside me and oozing out into the air through my skin in some drug fueled osmosis. I need to move. I need to do something.

I go out into the dark. The night air is turning cold this time of year. The magnolia blossoms have already died and fallen from the trees. I pick up little pebbles from the ground and throw them

straight up into the air, looking upward with my mouth open, then take off at a sprint.

The woods.

Running into trees, scraping my arms on thin branches and vines, spider webs sticking to my face. My foot falls into a snake hole and swallows my leg up to the knee. I pull myself free and keep on. A tree trunk has fallen over, balancing a couple feet above the ground. I do a barrel roll under it, coming up onto my knees with my fingers pointed like guns, ready to shoot.

At the train tracks I stop. They cut through the forest in both directions - butting up to the edge of my land. I follow them left, towards town, shuffling and dancing from timber to timber. My face is moist with sweat. I'm breathing hard. The only feeling left is pleasure. I dig into my pocket, pull out a Xanax and throw it down my throat.

A few miles up, a road dead ends into the tracks. It's lined with old muffler shops and auto repair garages. A single street lamp burns at the road's end, casting down a blurry circle of burning blue light.

There's a car parked under the lamp. I stop and squint. A woman is sitting on the tracks.

"Hello," I call out.

She's wearing a pink shirt and blue jeans.

"Hi," she answers.

I walk slowly towards her. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing."

Her butt is perched on the gravel that lines the tracks. Her legs are hanging across one of the rails.

I stand next to her, my hands on my hips, looking out into the dark. "You need some help?"

"No."

"You're just sitting?" I ask.

"Yes."

"In the dark. On the train tracks."

"Yep."

"That doesn't much sense," I tell her.

"You're out here."

"I'm going for a walk."

"I was too," she says. "Now I'm just resting."

"I don't believe you." I'm still breathing hard, gasping for air.

"So?" She looks down into her lap. "Just leave me alone, please."

I sit down next to her. "Why don't you just tell me what's bothering you?"

"It's personal."

"Oh. Well, I'll just sit here with you then."

"Why?" she asks.

I shrug. We sit for a few minutes in silence. The last lightning bugs of the year flash in the chilled darkness.

"You should really go," she says finally.

"You should really tell me what you're doing out here."

"I don't think you'd understand. You'll think I'm crazy."

"I try not to judge other people that way."

"Everybody judges other people that way."

I nod. "You're probably right. I guess I just try to keep it to a minimum." I point to the car. "Is that yours?"

"Yes."

"Why'd you drive way out here in the dark and come sit on these tracks?"

"I got something to do," she says.

"Oh. What's that?"

She looks me in the eye for the first time. "You really won't think I'm crazy?"

I wipe the sweat off my forehead with the sleeve of my shirt.



"Probably not."

"I'm out here to cut off my legs. To let the train cut them off."

"Oh. Why?"

"Cause I'm not supposed to have them."

"Why not?"

"I'm not sure. I just know I wasn't meant to have legs. They don't feel right." She taps her fingernails against her teeth. "Nothing feels right."

"That does sound kinda crazy."

She gives a little laugh. "I knew you'd say that."

"I've heard crazier."

"Thanks, I guess. It's like a disease. No, more like a condition. Other people have it too."

"Other people don't want their legs either?"

"It's called dysmorphia," she says. "That's the clinical term."

"Well damn. That is a strange thing. Why don't you just get a doctor to cut 'em off for you?"

"They won't. No surgeon will cut off two healthy legs. I heard there's some guy in Scotland who'll do it, but I can't afford to go over there."

"I'm sorry."

"My priest told me to pray on it, and I did. I've prayed every day for three years for God to give me the strength to overcome this."

"Didn't work?" I ask.

"No. He's been quiet."

"Why do you think that is?"

"I don't know," she says.

"Why do you think He gave you those legs if you're not supposed to have them?"

"I don't know."

"You don't wonder about that?"

"It's not for me to know."

"So you think God just made you wrong?"

"No. Well, I don't know."

"How can you say that? You have to question God's purpose if you're so sure you weren't meant to have legs."

"I put my faith in Him, I don't ask why."

I shake my head, but let it go. "So when's the train come?"

"Soon."

"You're really gonna do it? Sit there and let it run you over?"

"Yes."

"Jesus. I wouldn't have the balls."

"The Lord gives me strength."

"Alright. You want a Xanax to even you out while we wait?"

"I don't need drugs," she tells me. "I'm not nervous or scared. This is what I've wanted for a long time. I'm happy. I'm excited. I can't wait."

"Okay."

"You're not going to stop me?"

"No. I don't think it's a good idea, but I'm not going to stop you. If you think it'll make you happy, I guess you should give it a try."

"That's an enlightened way to think."

"Maybe. Maybe I'm crazy too."

She laughs. "I don't think you're crazy."

"You don't know me." I peer into the darkness, trying to spot an approaching headlight. "What are you plannin' on doing after that train comes and cuts you up?" I ask.

"I brought that." She points into the darkness. There's a wheelchair that I hadn't noticed. "And this." She shows me her cell phone. "I'm gonna call an ambulance after."

The rails start to shudder. The rumble of the train begins in the distance.

“Gimme the phone.”

She hands it to me. I dial 911, tell the operator that a woman's been hit by a train and lost her legs. I give her the name of the street and tell her to hurry. Standing up, I take off my belt.

“Take off yours too,” I tell her. I take the belts and tie them as tight as I can around her thighs. “So what's your name?” I ask her.

“Mary Anne.”

“That's a pretty name.”

“So you're really gonna help me?” she asks.

“I told you I would, didn't I. I don't want you doing it by yourself.”

The train whistle screeches. The noise is getting closer, louder, so that we have to shout to hear one another.

“I want it to get me as high up on my thighs as possible!”

I sigh. “Alright. Line yourself up like you want!”

The light of the train is visible now, maybe half a mile away. It's rumbling slowly towards us. I get behind Mary Anne and kneel down on the black-spotted gravel and loop my arms around her chest. The gravel has begun to vibrate.

She screams something.

“What?” I yell.

“I do wonder sometimes! About God!”

“Let me pull you away!”

“No!” she yells over the sound of the train. “Don't move me!”

The train gets faster the closer it comes - then it's on us. I can feel her body tense up as the big wheels roll the last few feet.

The train hits hard. Mary Anne's body jerks and twists. The train tries to throw her away from me but I hold tight, my knees skidding around in the gravel. She's shrieking.

I drag her away from the tracks. The long train is still rumbling past. There's blood everywhere. I fumble with my hands, trying to hold them over the amputations and slow the flow. The

sharp, jagged points of her femurs stick from the the fleshy stumps and slice my palms.

She's still screaming. I'm crying and trying not to vomit.

"You're gonna die of shock!" I yell at her as the last car rumbles by. "You're gonna fucking die before the ambulance gets here!"

"Do something!" she shrieks, thrashing around in pain.

"I don't know what to do!"

I hold her down, keep trying to cover the wounds, to squeeze her thighs and cut off the blood. Nothing works.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," I moan.

I punch her in the head.

"What are you doing?" she screams.

"I'm gonna knock you out," I pant. "I don't know what else to do."

I hit her in the temple as hard as I can. She gasps. Her eyes flutter closed.

I go to the tracks and find the mangled remains of her legs. Gagging, I peel off the fabric, then take it back to Mary Anne and use it as gauze. The blood soaks it almost immediately. The pieces of blue jean becomes wet and heavy. I lift her into the wheelchair and push it to road. There's no sign of the ambulance.

"I don't know what to do," I tell her unconscious body. I pace circles around the wheelchair. "Don't die. The ambulance is coming soon. Don't die."

I curse myself, then toss the phone into her lap and run away, jogging back down the tracks toward my house. There's nothing else to be done with the woman, and if I'm there when the ambulance arrives, they'll probably take me to jail.

Mary Anne's God wasn't there for her before. Hopefully He will be now.

\*

“Are you happy?” Stephen Summers asks.

He arrived a couple hours ago with a black ball of sticky opium to smoke in the long, slender pipe I bought from an old Chinaman in Shanghai.

We’re sitting on the floor, inhaling the floral smoke and watching a documentary on Hitler’s SS.

Stephen used to be named Ralph Newman. Ralph Newnan was a heroin dealer with a big house and three cars, until, on a warm summer day, he sold a package of drugs to an undercover police officer. He got away from the police at the scene, somehow, and spent two nights hiding in a drainage ditch, then showed up at my house and asked for a change of clothes. He left with two new outfits, a thousand dollars, and a bag of speed.

Taking a bus, he spent thirty hours in a cramped seat, eating the speed in little pieces and sketching in his notebook, before he ended up in Montana, living there in a trailer and doing anti-freeze with the locals until he bought a new identity from a Mexican human smuggler.

Ralph’s big house and cars are gone.

Now I have a new friend named Stephen.

“Are you? Happy?”

“You mean about the opium?” I ask. “Or overall?”

“Overall. Are you happy with your life?”

I think for a moment, decide to lie. “Occasionally. I am right now.”

“Well right now you’re high. What about when you’re sober?”

“I try to avoid sobriety as much as possible.”

“Don’t dodge the question.”

“Okay then, no. I’m not happy. I’m amazingly miserable. I

usually am when I'm high too."

"Why?" Stephen asks.

"I don't know, man."

"Don't you ever think about it?" Why you're unhappy? I do all the time."

"Who cares."

"I do."

"Fine. I do too. I think about it all the time. I have almost everything I want, but I'm unhappy. I was in love and engaged to a great girl, but I wasn't happy. My family surrounded me with love and support but I wasn't happy. I have friends, but I'm not happy. So fuck it."

"Why?"

"Why aren't I happy? How the hell should I know? Maybe I just see life for the brief, pointless shit storm it really is and choose to accept it instead of trying to fool myself into believing it's something more."

"Maybe the point is to just enjoy it as much as you can, while you can," Stephen says.

"Well, of course. That's seems obvious, but it's bullshit. That's what everyone says. It's an easy way to justify misery. It may even work for us. We have cars and houses and a little bit of money. We can use drugs and women when we feel bad and need to pass the time. But what about the others - the people who suffer constantly with no chance of relief? Homeless, starving people who fear a new level of pain every time they have to wake up.

"I mean, I can accept that life is meaningless, just a fluke of evolution that endowed us with heightened understanding, so I try to make the best of my consciousness. But what about the people who can't? They may worship God or find love or that kind of shit to squeeze out some happiness, but ultimately it's a terrible, hard life. For everybody. It's a goddam lottery of existence, but the only

prizes are either mostly bad, or cata-fucking-strophic. Like I said, it's just a bunch of bullshit."

Stephen digs into his nose, finds a bit of green crust, and wipes it on his pants. He stares at me, looking bored.

"Is it worth the pain and depression for a few glimpses of joy?" I continue. "I guess most people think so, or suicide would be legal and much more popular. They'd probably have a machine that kills people in the Wal-Mart pharmacy if people could see the truth. I'm just trying to ride it out with the least amount of suffering. Then I'll die." I take a drag from the pipe. "This isn't even an original conversation, so it's worthless. Everyone tries to figure out why they're not happy, but nobody can."

"We could always figure out some mind blowing new truth and change the world forever, sitting right here we could do that, couldn't we?" Stephen asks.

"Impossible."

"Sure we could."

"That's impossible because there's nothing original left to think," I explain. "Every conceivable thought has already been thought before."

"*That's* bullshit. You're always saying weird bullshit like that."

"It's true, cocksucker. Try it. Try to think of something original."

His face twists up.

"Alright...I'd like to beat off on Daley Square, on the exact spot the final bullet hit JFK. I think there's an X that marks the place."

I nod approval. "That's pretty good, but I'm sure some psycho's already done it."

"Okay, then, I want to sedate a woolly mammoth, gouge out one of its eyes, and skull fuck the shit out of the socket while the thing's still breathing." He passes me the pipe.

"I bet a caveman did that. That's too easy. And what's up with all the beating off and skull fucking? Get your mind out of the goddam gutter, man."

"You say a lot of stupid shit, but this is definitely the stupidest. It doesn't make any sense. What about new technologies and inventions? We can't even begin to imagine the shit to come."

I take a hit. "That's a good point. But there could be someone who thinks it up decades or centuries before the actual technology arrives. Like, just the concept of it." The opium is making me woozy. "I hold strong to my original argument."

"The scary thing about you is that you're almost right most of the time, yet still so monumentally wrong," Stephen says. "You understand all the problems, but you don't care enough to do anything about it. You're actually quite close to being smart."

"I can accept that."

"You act like you know everything, though. It gets pretty goddam annoying."

He cuts off another piece of opium, puts it into the pipe and begins smoking it. Chants of "Zieg heil! Zieg heil! Zeig heil!" come from the television.

"Do you know that there's bacteria way up in your nose that will kill you if it gets in your eyes?" I ask him.

"So what?"

"So maybe I can get some out and rub it all over my eyeballs."

"You're such a fucking idiot."

"That's what they tell me."

Self awareness comes easily when you hate yourself and want nothing from life except - hopefully - emotional escape and a quick, easy death. If you know what you don't want, the rest just works itself out.

I know I don't want a career or a God or the sense of



satisfaction that comes from a job well done. I don't want friends or family or love. I don't want life, success, or goodwill to men.

I want death.

I'm the layer of yellow scum that gathers around the inside of the toilet bowl where the water meets the rim. I'm the kind of man that must be killed if society is to stand a chance.

\*

This morning, Dr. Swann told me there is an inoperable tumor on the frontal lobe of my brain, and that I will be dead within a year. He showed me the CAT scan, but the tumor was just an innocent white blob the size of a quarter.

The sky is high and blue. I don't see a single cloud. It's warm, but not hot, and the deck chair I'm sitting in has hard wooden slats that dig into my back. The smell of decaying wood is all around me, and I can hear the trees growing. The wind is blowing into my face. I can see the individual pine needles, green with life, shaking on the branches. One breaks off and twirls to the ground in slow, tight somersaults.

It seems a terribly normal way to die, a tumor. I always fantasized of a piano falling on my head or a gang of angry, murderous midgets stabbing me to death - but I'm doomed to this.

Slow. Boring.

Maybe I'll lose all my hair, at least.

I strip naked and tie a blue and burgundy bow tie around my neck, then go back outside and lie face down in the grass. An ant crawls up my nose so I blow it out with a deep gust from my lungs. Another bites my balls, but I leave it alone. I don't feel like killing anything today.

The dogs wander over and Blue lies with her head resting on the back of my thigh. Fred sniffs my ass then runs into the woods.

Later, when I hear his deep throaty bay, I know that he's pinned something down a hole or up a tree.

John Wayne died the day I was born, just hours before my mother pushed me from her womb. Is there significance in this? Is there significance in anything?

Probably not.

Knowledge may be power, but it undeniably breeds misery.

What should I be feeling right now? What am I supposed to be feeling?

I fall asleep and wake up covered with bugs and itchy, swollen bites. I go inside and use a box cutter to slice all the skin from my forearms, then put on a Casper mask and run around the back yard.

The freshly exposed bones and muscles itch worse than the bug bites. Rusty blood streams down into the thick green grass.

A moment later, while pirouetting near a sprinkler, I realize that I don't know any Dr. Swann, and that I can't really picture his office or what the man looks like. Then I remember that I've actually been chewing Jimson Weed all afternoon, and that this is probably just some intense hallucination.

I open my eyes and I'm in a jail cell - think, "Shit, not again," as steel bands of fear squeeze my chest. I squeeze my eyes shut, sob, then open them. I'm in a car. A black man sitting next to me puts a pistol in his mouth and blows out the back of his skull. I scream.

Blink again.

I'm on my bedroom floor. I pinch myself all over but don't trust the pain. I find Paul in the living room and he assures me again and again that this reality is truth, that everything is fine.

I sob then smoke joints and watch him play video games for the rest of the night.

Life goes on, same as before.

\*

It's Sunday and I'm with my mother in the sitting room of her old house. She studies me from an antique suede chair. My father is in his bedroom on the other side of the house. He hasn't spoken to me in months, since a little after the party in Atlanta.

The walls are breathing and the room is slowly shrinking. The three Xanax I took on the drive here have, so far, had no effect.

"We missed you at your sister's birthday party last week," Mom says. "It was her thirtieth, you know."

"Sorry. I was...busy."

"It was fun," she adds.

"Okay."

She skips the rest of the small talk and jumps straight to what's bothering her.

"We wish you would go back to school. It's so embarrassing for us to have a college drop-out in the family. Your actions reflect on all of us, you know. Your Nanny calls everyday, asking about you. She's very worried. Does she ever call you?"

"No," I lie, then tell her, "I'm hungry."

"I'd offer you some ribs, but you're too big already. My God, son, have you no self control? Look at that belly on you!"

"There's ribs?" I sit up and the chair and look down the hall towards the kitchen. "I like to eat," I say absently. "Why should I deprive myself of that?"

"Because it's disgusting and unhealthy. A boy your age should not weigh over two-hundred pounds. Self control, Reilly. You've never understood that concept."

"You raised me," I say without interest.

This conversation has been well rehearsed.

"Yes, yes. I'm a failure as a mother. You make sure to remind me of that every time we see one another."

"I'm hungry," I tell her again.

"Go eat then. But I think I heard your father heading to the kitchen."

"Oh. Then I'll get Miss Trudy to bring me some ribs."

"She's not your personal servant, Reilly. She's here to help with the housework. That's all. How many times have I told you this?"

"Goddammit."

Mom sighs, "Don't use that language in front of your mother, Reilly. It's disrespectful."

I try to guess what liquors they have in the bar, wonder if I can make it there and back without running into my father.

"Your brother's going to Russia to study abroad next summer."

"Really? Russia? That's interesting. I thought it was dangerous to go over there."

"Oh, not anymore. Besides, we've made arrangements. It does seem terrible to me, but he's set on going." She's looking out the window at something. I can't see what. "Of course, we would send you anywhere you wanted if you were still - well, you know."

"Yes." My eyes are looking for something sturdy and sharp to jam into my neck. "I know."

Yesterday, a Friday, we ate mescaline and laughed when Melanie stripped naked and ran around the yard, convinced Ronald McDonald was chasing her, trying to eat her tongue. She finally collapsed in a sobbing mound of tan, bare flesh and spent the day screaming long terrifying shrieks.

I closed my eyes and lived a thousand lives that were, when it

was all over, just as boring and useless as this one. When night came I was sober enough to bake a cake in the stainless steel convection oven I bought last year from the department store. It was a chocolate cake with chocolate icing. It was delicious.

I've been told that many other manic depressives forget to eat, too caught up in their work and ideas to remember. I'm far too lazy and self-absorbed for this to be a problem. At the first hint of hungry discomfort, I gorge myself.

Melanie, dressed by this point, ate a slice of the cake while explaining how her life was fundamentally changed from the drug experience. I didn't pay attention, instead fantasized about fucking her up the ass. I wondered if she'd let me, probably not – she's probably a dyke. I decided that maybe sometime I'd try to talk her into letting me watch her go down on another girl.

I think I'd like that. I flipped through a list of possible candidates, but my mind kept coming back to Lisa. Yeah, I'd definitely like that.

\*

A siren is blaring nearby, a steady scream of electronic warning. I try to drink away the noise, can't.

I hear his truck pull into the driveway, then Remmie comes into the house dressed in camouflage. His boots are loud on the hard wood floor as he goes to the bar and fills a glass with Wild Turkey. He drains it, pours himself another.

"The only movie you have is *The Passion of the Christ*," I say from the ancient couch. "You're a sick man."

"I'm a good Christian man and you're going to hell to burn with the Jews and A-rabs." His glass is empty again.

"I can live with that."

"Heathen."

"Shoot anything?" I ask.

He strips off his boots and tosses them aside. "Duck."

We sit and drink, watching the movie on the huge projection screen I helped Rennie install a couple weeks before. The room is painted with the flickering images of torture and blood from the film. The coffee table in front of me is filled with assorted bleached animal skulls.

I try to avoid looking directly at the dark, gaping eye holes.

"That fucking alarm is pissin' me off." Rennie says.

"Where's it coming from?"

"Some fucking office building. Alarm went on the fritz. I've already called the damn police once today. I told 'em if they didn't hurry, I'd have to take care of it myself."

"I'm just glad you hear it too. I've been sitting here thinking I was hallucinating all morning."

"You ain't that crazy," he says.

We go back to the movie.

"Goddam Jews," Rennie mutters at the screen.

"Explain something to me," I ask as Rennie's black housekeeper brings us a plate of cold chicken and some napkins. I smile and thank her, then turn back to Rennie. "Why does everyone hate the Jews so much? They've got this universal hatred surrounding them that I can't understand. Take away the funny hats and curly sideburns, and they're just like us."

"You're ignorant, boy," Rennie tells me. "It's that kind of ignorance that's goin' to give them the freedom they need to finalize their control of the banks and media. And from there, they'll rule us all under the power of their kyke-run New World Order."

"Are you serious?" I start to laugh. The Grey Goose I'm drinking is getting to me.

“That’s right, boy. Best not laugh, either. Damn Jews are quietly wrappin’ their money hungry Jew hands ‘round everything they need to set up control. It’s just a matter of time - ‘less we do something to stop them.” He winks. “Let’s just say ol’ Hitler had the right idea.”

I shake my head, still laughing. “Jesus Christ. I don’t want to second guess the mayor of this here town, but you sound fucking crazy. Really, really crazy. The kind of crazy that makes me feel better about myself.”

He snarls, leaps up from his chair, spills whiskey on the hand-stitched Indian rug. “They killed our Lord!” He points at the screen. “Just look! Look at them do that to God’s baby boy!”

“Not my lord, you fucking nut.”

“Goddammit, don’t start this ignorant shit again.” He slumps back into his chair.

“I’m ignorant, but you believe people come back from the dead and an all knowing, all seeing higher power controls our lives from his outer space paradise where we all go when we die.”

“Not where you go, asshole,” Rennie mutters.

The doorbell rings. The housekeeper passes us on her way to answer it.

“Goddammit! I don’t want no fucking company!” Rennie screams.

“You’re an idiot,” I mouth at Rennie as two women and a little girl come into the room.

The women are both overweight and badly dressed. I turn away without interest. They sit down across from me. The little girl begins playing on the floor with water-stained blocks the housekeeper brings her. Rennie introduces the three of them, but I’m too drunk now to notice names.

The women make small talk. Rennie nods distractedly as he watches the little girl hum and stack the blocks. He smiles, then

walks to the big oak cabinet and removes a glossy black .45, turns and points it at me. My nut sack shrivels into a tight pouch.

"Watcha think, Sammie," he asks the little girl without taking his eyes off me. "Should I kill the heathen?"

The child is watching, frozen like cold wax, a block still clutched in her little hand. The light from the projector decorates her face with colorful flashes of gore.

"Yeah!" the girl says as her face breaks out in a smile. She begins to chant, "Kill him, kill him."

Oh, that's real nice," I say to the woman I think is her mother. My voice is hoarse. "That's some fine parenting right there. You should be real proud."

Remmie pulls the trigger. The gun clicks harmlessly. He barks laughter.

"I'm gonna be honest, with ya'," Remmie says to me. "I thought the girl would say no."

"You know how goddam scary it is to have a gun pointed at your head?" I yell. "You're a sick fuck!"

"I'm the mayor - and goddam respectable at that."

"And you!" I yell, turning on the child - Sammie, I think.

"When someone asks you 'Should I kill him,' the answer is always no! No, no, no, no - No!"

The fear is sobering. I grab the bottle of vodka and take a long drink.

"It was empty, you pussy," Remmie tells me, then tosses the pistol pack into the drawer.

Sammie is giggling. The two women sit silently.

"That doesn't mean you're not a lunatic. After that fucking Jew story, what the hell should I expect?"

"That wasn't a story, it was goddam fact!" Remmie yells. He pours himself more whiskey.

"What's a Jew?" the little girl asks.



“Good question, baby girl.” Remmie kneels down beside her, wobbling on the balls of his feet, and points at the screen. “You see those men hurting Jesus? Those are the Jews.”

Sammie's mouth opens in a little O. “Why would they hurt Jesus?”

“Because they're evil, dirty Jews. They hate God and they hate me and you.”

I look at the women, expecting them to interject. They don't.

I turn back to Sammie and scream, “Lies! Don't you listen to his lies, little girl. Look at them - they're white, just like us!”

“You want me to get the gun again?” Remmie asks.

“They're not black,” I say. “They're not Indian or Mexican. They're not even A-rabs! They're just white people who don't believe in Jesus. Neither do I! Does that make me Jewish? I don't think so.”

“Wrong,” Remmie points at me. “He's wrong.” He turns to Sammie. “Who you gonna believe? Me - the mayor - or him, an alcoholic college dropout.”

“Christ,” I mutter.

I'm bored with the argument and start to eat the chicken. Remmie flirts with the women. Sammie sits with me on the couch and drinks juice while watching the movie. The office alarm is still ringing.

“Gimme some more of those blue pills,” Remmie tells me. He smacks and gnaws at a chicken wing. Grease shines around his lips. “If I don't relax and that alarm don't quite ringin', I'm libel to shoot someone for real.”

I give him some Xanax - maybe five or six. Remmie chases them down with a slug of whiskey. His eyes study the two women. They blush and giggle, occasionally leaning to whisper into one another's ear. I sigh and lean back, resting the vodka bottle on my gut.

"You ladies ever get kinky?" Remmie asks. He jerks his eyebrows up and down in little twitches that, I guess, he thinks are sexy. "You know, girl on girl and all that shit?"

"Oh, Remmie," the one who I think is Sammie's mom giggles. "You're crazy."

"Shut your mouth, bitch!" he snaps. His anger comes quickly from the bottle and the pills. "You both look like sluts to me."

I roar with laughter. The women look unsure. Their faces struggle to hold onto big, fake smiles.

"Cover your ears," I tell Sammie.

"I could fuck both of you if I wanted to," Remmie brags.

"Hell, I bet I could fuck you both at the same time. You whores look like you'd be freaks in bed."

"Stop it, Remmie," one of them says. "There's a baby here."

"Fuck you and fuck her," he slurs.

The women rise and gather up Sammie. "We have to get going," they say as they head for the front door.

"You sluts better leave!" Remmie screams at their backs. "Run away before I whip out my cock and...and..." he fades away as the door closes. "Stupid whores," he croaks.

"They took that well," I say.

"Stupid cows. Divorced sluts lookin' for a new paycheck."

"Oh." I drain the rest of the vodka, fetch a new bottle from the bar and sit back on the couch. "I think I'd fuck a Jewish girl if I had the chance." I tell Remmie. "That would be one to check off the list."

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" he screams. "They have those thick, rough twats. Your cock would get rug burn! It would be like screwing a Brillo pad. I'd rather fuck a goat."

"I bet you would. I think that says more about you than me."

"I'm gonna go take a shit." Remmie disappears into his bedroom.

I go into the kitchen and talk to Miss June, the housekeeper, about a Vidalia Onion casserole recipe. She laughs when I fall off the kitchen stool. The bottle of liquor hits the floor and begins to slowly leak, making little gulping sounds.

"You best lay off that strong drink, now," Miss June tells me. "That'll rot a hole straight through your stomach."

"I already got a hole in my stomach."

"You got a hole in yo' stomach? And you in here askin' me 'bout onions? You don't need be eatin' no spicy foods."

"That's what my mom says."

"You best listenin', then. Old folks got some wisdom to pass down."

"Yes, ma'm," I say to shut her up.

"Where Remmie?" she asks.

"Bathroom."

"Oh. I goin' go out back and pluck this duck he kilt. You wanna come watch?"

"No, ma'm," I say from the floor. "I'm fine right here." I pick up the vodka bottle and struggle to drink it from my prone position.

She takes the bird from the sink and goes out the screen door to the backyard. I struggle to my feet, the liquor splashing on my clothes.

Walking back to the television room, I hear swearing coming from Remmie's bedroom. He comes running out, shirtless and carrying a rifle.

"Goddam ringin'! Goddam alarm! I'm gonna take care of this myself!"

He dashes past me and out the front door. A shot cracks. The alarm stops. I hear screeching tires. Remmie comes back in with a smile.

"That's how the mayor does it. Sometimes the top man just

has to step up and handle the business.”

“Jesus, man!” I scream. “That office is three streets away!”

“So? I didn’t miss.”

“You could have killed somebody!”

“I didn’t. Folks in their cars looked at me funny, though.

Don’t they know who I am?”

“Shit.” Police sirens begin to whine in the distance. “I gotta get out of here. This is bad stuff, man. Bad stuff.”

“Pussy!” Remmie yells.

I grab my bottle of vodka and head for the back door.

“You’re a fucking pussy! No one can touch me! I’m the god-dam mayor!”

He’s still screaming as the screen door slams behind me.

\*

There’s a bottle of hate in the cupboard beside my bed that I bring out to drink on special occasions.

It’s sweet - not bitter like you’d think - and thick like cough syrup. The liquid is the color of twirled black licorice. The sticker on the clear glass bottle reads: “Hate - The Good Stuff” in rolling cursive letters set on a field of deep green.

Can you see the bottle yet? In your mind?

Good.

Here -

Have a drink.

I’m going eighty or ninety through beating rain that clouds my windshield when I see him. Small, wet - dirty even from this distance. His shoulders are hunched against the wind. Rain pum-

mels his tiny frame.

“Goddam midget.”

I stop my truck alongside him. The tires glide over the thin layer of water accumulated on the asphalt. I slide the last thirty feet or so, my rear wheels fishtailing back and forth in a long, uncontrolled slide..

“Hey there,” I call out the window, which lowers on command from the electric controls.

“Howdy,” he replies in a high pitched voice. “Where ya headed?”

I shot up heroin an hour ago. My head drifts down towards my lap, fighting against my neck. I close my eyes, just for a second.

“I said where ya headed?” the little man asks again, breaking me from the opium-induced nod.

“Elementary school,” I call to him. “On my way to shape young minds, inspire courage and the like. I’m their last great hope.”

“Oh yeah? Sounds nice.”

“I had to take heroin just to get up the nerve. It’s a frightening place.”

Wet strands of hair stick to his forehead.

“Get in the goddam truck, buddy,” I yell. “Only a freak would be out in this weather!”

He struggles up into the cab, pulling himself up with the armrest and scrambling into the big seat. Freezing rain blows in, splattering my face and hands, causing painful dots of red and purple to blossom on my skin.

“Elementary school, huh?” he asks in his whiny little voice. “Never had much use for all that shit, myself. I never really fit in. Why the hell are you going there?”

“I tutor a little Mexican girl.”

“That’s nice.”

“Not really.”

I stomp the gas pedal. When the tires grab the asphalt, we shoot back into the road. A compact car - looks foreign made - comes up behind us, slams on their brakes and hydroplanes off the road and into a tree.

“Goddam fool!” I shout into the rear view mirror as we drive away.

There’s a smell coming from the little man, an enormous stink to be originating from such a tiny creature. He’s wearing an insulated flannel jacket, stained around the shoulders with something brown.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Judge.”

“Judge?”

“That’s right, Judge,” he replies. “Judge Harris.”

“Judge, like you’re a judge?”

He spins in the seat, pointing a vicious little finger in my face.

“Don’t you ever compare me to those fucking shit eaters!” he screams. “Don’t you ever do it!”

“Alright.”

“I ain’t a goddam judge. Hate those fucking corrupt, God complex mother fuckers. Judge is just a name, that’s all.”

“Fair enough.”

“How ‘bout you, got a name?”

“Reilly,” I tell him.

“Alright, Reilly, old chap, nice to meet you. You like cocaine?”

“Not right now.”

He pulls a baggie of powder from his coat. A straw juts from the bag and a rubber band holds it all together. One good rip, and he lets out a whoop.

“I’ve done a goddam eightball already today, Reilly - and, boy, I’m just getting started,” he boasts wide-eyed. His mouth stretches

into a manic smile, showing lots of sharp yellow teeth. Sweat beads on his forehead and drips down his nose and chin, mixing with the rain water. "You ever catch the clap from a one-legged Cambodian boy-whore, Mr. Reilly?"

"Can't say that I have, Judge." I'm concentrating on the rifle in the backseat. I probably can't get to it fast enough if this freak turns violent.

"Me, I'm on my way to Savannah," he says. "Got a little a show down there, and old Judge is the big star."

He's slipping in and out of a British accent. I reach into the glove box and take a joint from my metal cigarette case then spark my lighter. We pass the elementary school. I just keep driving.

That's no place for this man, consumed as he is by the awful white drug - clearly unstable in the way only the truly deranged can know. I fear dropping him off anywhere near children, especially the little Mexicana I tutor.

"Yeah, this show, it's quite a big draw down there," he's telling me. "Hottest ticket in town they say." He takes another hit from the baggie.

"Oh yeah. What is it?"

"Well, it's an artsy little thing, just a bit off the beaten path. I like to call it freeistic modo-expressionism. Basically, it's me fucking the shit out of a couple nigger girls for about an hour."

"They have a lot of live sex shows down there in Savannah, Judge?" I ask.

"Well, I don't like to give free advertising to the competition, if you know what I mean." He takes a toot of the cocaine. "Let's just say I'm the best."

"I hear ya," I say, distracted.

I stare ahead as we drive through the downpour, trying and failing to devise a plan. This is life on the edge. Toes on the cliff, staring down into the abyss, one step over the line. I suck on the

remaining stub of my joint.

“Why don’t you come on down there with me?” he asks. “You give me a ride down there, I’ll throw you fifty bucks for gas and get you into the show for free. The parties afterward will blow your mind, man. I guar-an-fucking-tee it.”

“You’re a crazy little bastard, aren’t you?”

Judge cackles - a twacked out Rumpelstiltskin, his eyes shining with fever and cocaine-lust. I think for a moment, contemplating his proposal.

“Alright, goddammit, I’m in,” I tell him. “Savannah and the fuck show it is.” I grab a vial of LSD from under my seat, hold the dropper over my tongue, and administer several hits. Smacking my tongue, I tell him, “We’ll be there in forty minutes.”

“You know what?” Judge asks as a thin trail of blood begins to trickle from his nose. “I like you, Reilly. You’re good people.”

We arrive at Judge’s gig just as the acid is coming full on.

The building is buried deep in a neighborhood of ratty, worn-down houses, sandwiched among abandoned warehouses with broken out windows. I park the truck and pocket a couple more joints before following Judge past two burly rednecks who look like off-duty cops. They’re standing at the door, Desert Eagle style Magnums in quick release holsters under their armpits. They give me odd looks, but say nothing as Judge leads me into the warehouse.

The inside of the building is lit by three big metal-halides that hang from the ceiling. The lights turn everything below bluish-white. It seems beautiful against the carnage before us.

Steel cages filled with snarling rotweillers and pitbulls line a wall. Two dogs are already fighting in a carpeted pit, tearing away chunks of wet, hairy flesh with sharp teeth that glow in the light.

Men gathered around them scream encouragement while



drinking beers and waving money.

My head begins to spin, the world begins to change, and I have to lean on Judge's shoulder for support as the acid takes me completely.

Two naked black women approach and I grin triumphantly and mumble, "Okay, now I'm fucked up!" Judge slaps one of the women on her ashy, stretch-marked ass while she asks hungrily if he's got the stuff and her fingers wiggle with nervous anticipation.

Judge yells for her to "shut the fuck up" then leads us all behind a stained red satin sheet hanging from a clothesline and hands the women, who I now see have pale scars all around their saggy tits and hairy, flapping vagina's that look like strips of raw bacon, a bag of cocaine that they pour onto the back of their hands and snort greedily.

Judge strips off his pants to reveal the biggest cock I've ever seen, and it has "Hercules" tattooed in blue-green letters running down its length and he turns to me and says, "Here, take some yallo."

I snort it and I can feel the eyes of the goddam dogs bearing into my back so I walk around the red sheet and struggle to walk through the air - which is now thick and heavy - towards the cages while dodging the streaks of lightning tracing through the air and when I reach the dogs I have to pause and catch my breath before I begin poking my fingers through the thin criss-crossing bars to stroke their cold wet noses. I move from cage to cage, naming the dogs one by one in honor of the Seven Dwarfs and when I get to Sleepy the asshole snaps at my finger and draws blood that drips down my hand and I, briefly, admire the irony that Sleepy, not Grumpy, has lashed out, then I cup my throbbing finger and move to the pit just in time to see a throat ripped open and dark brown blood spray and soak the carpet.

The carcass is dragged out of sight so two new fighters can be

led in and it sickens me so I walk to where Judge is now viciously fucking one of the black women while the other gets her cunt tongue lashed and I remember that I have six Xanax in my pocket so I take them all to even out this trip that is becoming intense and I see an old colored man selling moonshine from a rickety folding table and he calls to me - asks if I need a drink - which I answer by shoving a handful of cash across the table and snatching the paper Dixie cup he hands me then drain it easily without much burn thanks to my cocaine-numb throat then I hand the cup back for a refill which the old man gives me with a trembling hand and I realize he's talking, babbling, about filthy evil Koreans so I mumble that I hate those slopes almost as much as I hate the goddam niggers then the air turns yellow and I laugh and throw the liquor in the old man's face and when he falls to the ground clutching at his eyes in pain I grab the rusty tin bucket of peanuts sitting on his table and run back to watch Judge and begin tossing the peanuts at the women which causes Judge to cackle and the women to swear that they will fuck me up so I throw my head back and howl and point to Hercules pounding in and out in long hard strokes and tell the women to shut the fuck up and then light on of the joints just as the Xanax kicks in and everything goes black until -

- I wake up naked in a bathtub of cold water, with a layer of what looks like motor oil rippling on the surface.

I stand and realize I'm still a little high, notice that my cock and testes are clammy white, tight and wrinkled. Weak sunlight comes through a small, rectangular window set high above the sink.

I vomit red roses into the toilet, blow the lingering petals from my nostrils, and walk out into a studio apartment furnished with a couch and a sex swing that hangs from the stucco ceiling. Half a dozen naked women are scattered, unconscious, throughout the room.

I can see Judge - naked except for a blue and white sea captain's hat that's tilted on his head - tangled in the black nylon straps of the sex swing. I walk over to him, leaving wet footprints on the carpet behind me. The midget's skin is a light purple.

When I poke him, he's cold and dead. His body sways on the straps and spins in slow circles.

Panicked, I find my jeans, smeared with something that looks like grape jelly, and run from the apartment, hoping like hell that I'll find my truck before the police show up and start taking people to jail.

When I get home, I spend an hour smoking marijuana in silence. The midget's miscolored, twisted body plays from a hidden projector, displaying the blurred image in gigantic form on the livingroom wall.

At some point, I realize with epiphanastic clarity that by manipulating the vertical y-axis of my left heel, I can re-align a medically unknown string of nerves that are, now obviously, the cause of my mental illnesses.

I collect all the footwear I own - one pair of sandals, one pair of deck shoes, one pair of leather loafers, one pair of gray running shoes - and examine them. The sandals, deck shoes, and loafers all have hard, thin soles that don't suit my purpose. I trash them. The sneakers have a high rubber heel. They'll work.

I use an Exacto knife to slice a careful, thin gap into the heel. The cut begins at the back of the shoes and runs about two inches in. I fill the space with a single layer of vertically arranged nickels, then use Super Glue to close the wound.

After the glue dries, I slide my feet into the sneakers. Sparks ignite in my brain and leap around my skull. My left heel is one-eighth of an inch higher than my right. My nerves are aligned.

I feel better already.

More sane.

\*

Even if you win for the short term, you'll ultimately fail - alive or dead.

Imagine if the great men from the past - men who thought they were working to shape the world - could see what their efforts have yielded. There is no change. There is no hope.

Marx failed. Hitler failed. Jefferson failed.

I just don't try.

"Have you ever listened to Charles Manson speak?" I ask her from the love seat.

"I guess. Sure, he used to be on the news all the time."

Outside the window, the sun is low and lazy in a cold sky burning to darkness. Everything is the dead color of cement.

"I saw an interview he did in the eighties," I say. "It was him talking to a reporter for forty minutes."

"Did it scare you?" Dr. Clance questions, pen poised above her notebook.

I think for a moment before answering. "No. He's just some crazy asshole. The thing I noticed was that he sounded just like the President."

"What do you mean?"

"They both spew these ridiculous concepts that they know are lies, but they say them anyway just for the effect - to manipulate our emotions. Especially our fears. They talk like everyone but there is a moron who can't understand the grand plans they've put in the place to save us all from ourselves. They use demented,

circular logic that makes no sense to anyone but them and their... disciples - or citizens - whatever you want to call them.

"The worst part is they both kill through proxies. You know Manson never actually killed anyone, don't you? The violence is necessary to maintain and magnify the fear they use for control, but neither one is willing to endanger themselves and actually get their hands dirty. Instead they use other people to carry out their wars and their killings."

"And this bothers you? This connection?" she asks.

"Of course it bothers me! I watch an imprisoned psychopath rant about the decay of society, and in him I see the leader of the free world - the lawful ruler of our lives. Doesn't that seem like it's very obvious and very wrong?"

"Well...it's a theory."

"It's just an observation. I just observe. I'm not trying to change anything."

"Why not? You say that often. Why not try to change things if you see what's wrong? Why not try to make things better?"

"There no point. I'll never make a difference. Accepting that frees me. Fighting it makes me like everyone else who sees the truth."

"That's very pessimistic."

I pull back my lips and show her my crooked teeth as I smile.

"I'm kinda like that, if you haven't noticed. Pessimistic. I've been working on the whole self destruction thing too. It's harder than most people suspect."

"What exactly do you mean by 'self-destruction thing?'"

"Oh, you know. Drinking enough to rot all my organs. Smoking for the cancer and lung problems. Cocaine to kill the tissue of my heart. Everything else illegal or frowned-on or harmful. The side effects are just a bonus. I eat way too much too."

"You've always told me that you don't use drugs, Reilly."

"Yeah...that was a lie. But the drugs are the easy part. The hard thing is reducing your existence to complete worthlessness. Doing nothing, contributing nothing, helping no one. Not doing everything that parents and religions and societies have trained me to believe are the most important things in life. Rejecting the ideas ingrained in me since birth, while everyone around me screams and cries and begs for me to stop."

"Then why do you do it?" Her face looks like someone has shoved a cold metal rod up her twat.

"Because it's honest. It's truth. There are no pretensions or hopeless dreams. It makes me free."

"But people can't function that way. We'd have none of the technology, none of the creature comforts that we enjoy."

"I don't want everyone to be like me. You should kill people like me. I'm the evil parasite that nests among you. I'm the amoral creature that must be stamped out by people like you. I don't want to convert anyone to my beliefs. That would defeat everything."

"You know what we call that?" she asks.

"Who?"

"Doctors. Psychiatrists."

"Oh. What do you call that?"

"We call that bullshit. Over-thinking bullshit."

"But it sounds good, right?"

She laughs. "It sounds like bullshit you're using to escape. Now, tell me - honestly - about your feelings."

We stare at each other. I scratch my cheek.

"What about Sarte?" I ask.

"I don't want to talk about Sarte. Sarte doesn't count. I want to talk about you. Tell me how you feel."

I'm quiet for a moment, staring at the ground, trying to wait her out. I finally say, "Over-stimulated."

"Over-stimulated?"

"I've got all this shit bombarding me from every direction, things that tell me what to wear and what to do and how to think and how to live - and it's just too much. There's so much stimulation that I end up feeling nothing."

"Nothing?" she asks.

"This isn't how we're meant to live."

"How who isn't meant to live?"

"People. Human beings. We've created this society of dullness and boredom. Everything we were meant to work for is handed to us now. It's all automated. So are we. We're all just bored automatons. That's why people use drugs and sex and money - because they're so goddam bored."

"Why is that?"

"Because they figured out how to control us. They've found our base feelings and desires and exploited us."

"Who are 'they'?"

"The government, the corporations."

"But not you? They can't control you? Why not?"

"Feelings are vulnerability. Feelings are weakness. If I don't have feelings, I can't be controlled."

"Feelings are life," she says.

"I hate life. I gave life a chance and she crushed me. I don't want to hurt like that again."

"She?" Dr. Clance asks.

"The girl I love. Loved."

"Yet you're still unhappy. Even though you claim to have no feelings."

"What?"

"The way you live now, without feelings. It still makes you miserable," she says.

"It doesn't hurt as much. It's better this way."

"Is it?"

"It really is."

"It's not natural," she says.

"It is for me. I lived my whole life feeling nothing. I didn't have to try to feel that way. I didn't even know other people had emotions until I was older. When I learned that they had something I didn't, I was jealous of them. I wanted to feel what they felt."

"Then I met this girl, and all the sudden, I felt. I had all these emotions. Terrible, wonderful feelings. And she used them against me. So I went back to the nothingness."

"It's not real. This nothingness you claim isn't real."

"Yes, it is."

"No, it's not."

"I know you feel, Reilly. Tell me how you feel."

"I don't feel."

"Tell me the truth," she insists, leaning forward. "Tell me how you feel."

"I'm still in love with her," I blurt out.

She settles back into her chair. "Good. Why was that so hard to admit?"

"Because if I don't admit it, it's not real."

"That's just more bullshit."

"But there's only one thing I feel about. Her. Everything else is still missing."

"Are they? Really?"

"Yes. I know they are. I can feel the pain and the love and it just magnifies the absence of the rest."

"When I have patients in your situation, I always tell them the same thing."

"What's that?" I ask.

"Imagine you're frozen. Not having feelings is like being frozen. When you start to thaw out, there's going to be pain, just like



when you come in from the cold and your hands burn. It hurts at first, but you have to get through the pain if you want to thaw out. You can either deal with the pain and get better, or you can stay frozen and die. You have to choose. You have to suck it up and get through the pain.”

“I think I'd rather die,” I tell her.

“No you wouldn't. I know you don't really think that.”

“You know nothing.” I stand up. “I'm going to leave now. I don't want to talk anymore.”

“Stay, Reilly. We're close to something here.”

“No, we're not. You can't change me. No one can change anything.”

“Don't think like that, Reilly. Have faith in something. Have faith in yourself. I know I can help you.”

“No, you can't.” I open the door, stand for a moment with my back to Dr. Clance, then tell her, “I don't think I'm going to come back.”

Outside, in the cold, thoughts of Lisa are everywhere. I walk to my car, breathing deeply, trying to calm myself, but the despair is inside me, down there deep.

I cry.

\*

Tom Petty's on the radio. All four tires are off the road.

“You better veer left,” I say from my seat on the hard hump, sandwiched between Stephen and Rich in the old truck. “Turn the goddam wheel left.”

Stephen takes his time getting us back into the center of the lane. The Xanax are getting to him. I can see his mind slowing,

taking the first few steps toward total inebriation and blackness - all the more frightening because he has no idea just how deep it already has him.

It's an evil drug - frightening really. Total blackouts are common, foolish deeds guaranteed.

We started drinking at the bar around noon. Football was on and hard drink was cheap. The bartender watched our table with a scowl while we cheered and took bumps of cocaine. The women in the bar made a wide arch around our table on their way to the toilets.

I had fallen twice on the way to the truck, and now small specks of blood are oozing from my palms and elbows. There's no pain yet, but I'm sure it will come later.

The feeling of impending disaster is beginning to rise through the fog of drugs.

"Slow down," I mumble. "I don't want to get pulled over."

"I got it," Stephen answers. His voice is slurred.

We turn into their neighborhood, a collection of cheap houses rented to college students and unhappy people who can afford nothing better.

Driving along the dark streets, my fear begins to shrink. Home. Safety. No police here hoping to ruin our night with jail time and government-sanctioned beatings.

I relax, close my eyes and lean back. A quiet has settled in the cab. The hypnotic beating of the old V-8 lulls our drug soaked minds.

"We're here," Stephen says.

I open my eyes just in time to see a pine tree headed straight toward us. The engine revs violently, shouting a mechanical warning.

We hit hard.

My head lashes forward and strikes the dash. Skin splits open. To my right, Rich flies out of his seat and crashes through the windshield. He's frozen there for a second, the glass cracking around his body in little white lines, then it gives completely and his body breaks through. He soars out onto the grass, stands up, turns around and holds his head, staring back into the cab.

We've crashed in their neighbor's front yard. Stephen and I sit without speaking, staring back at Rich and listening to the horn blare into the night.

"Shit," Stephen says finally. "My foot slipped off the brake."

"Turn off the goddam horn!" Rich yells, stumbling towards us. The headlights turn him yellow.

"I can't!" Stephen yells back.

One heartbeat. Two.

"Run."

We jump out the truck, scramble into the darkness, fleeing the wail of the horn. Rich falls in behind Stephen and they disappear next door, into their house. I run in circles for a moment, unsure where to go.

"Stop right there, shithead!" a voice screams from the night.

I turn and see a giant before me, a police issue 9mm pointed at my head.

"You goddam punks hit my tree! I'm gonna fuckin' ki--"

My foot finds his crotch, cutting him off in mid-threat. He falls to the ground, dropping the gun and cradling his testicles.

Through the sound of the horn I can hear him gasping for air and whimpering. I look at the gun lying harmlessly in the grass, contemplate picking it up, instead turn and flee.

I run to Rich and Stephen's house. The front door is open. White light flows out - the inviting glow of safety.

Inside, they're both on the couch. Rich already has a towel to his head, trying to soak up the blood pouring from a gash on the

top of his scalp. The blood is staining his gloves.

I check my forehead. Wet. When I take away my hand, it's sticky and stained with blood. Head wounds always bleed like a bastard.

"Your neighbor's a cop or something!" I yell at them.

"Yeah," Stephen laughs.

"What are we gonna do?" Rich moans.

Outside I can hear shouts - people coming out of their houses, irritated by the commotion.

"Gotta keep moving," I mutter. "Gotta keep moving. If they can't find me, they can't kill me."

I run to the kitchen and peek out the back door.

Clear.

In the distance, sirens are already drawing close.

I fling open the door and dart out, moving like a ninja between the bushes and trees. Diving under a row of hedges several houses away, things begin to spin and grow fuzzy.

I pass out.

Darkness.

Twigs poke me in the back. Leaves are stuck to tacky blood on my forehead. I peel them off and toss them away, then get to my knees and look around.

Shit.

Jesus.

They'll be out for me now - crazed police drunk on blood, scouring the streets for me this very moment, hungry to appease their deep lust for violence with a vicious beating. They'll kill me for sure, possibly even cannibalize my flesh.

This is it. This is the end.

I creep through the yards, pausing every few steps to scan the night. As I pass Rich and Stephen's house, flashing red and blue

lights are everywhere. I cross the back yard, hiding behind the bushes that line the perimeter, darting my head up like a prairie dog to survey the inevitable carnage.

All the lights in the house are on. The scene inside is well lit against the darkness of night. Police are searching the rooms, pulling out drawers, throwing things against the walls, tossing the mattresses. From the living room come shouts, insults, cries of pain. I've heard the local law enforcement enjoys anal rape. I take a moment to hope that my friends will be spared - executed at least - before the sodomy begins.

I take off at a run through the neighborhood and make it to the main road, amazed to find myself alive. I keep pressure on my head wound with a balled up sock. Cars are swishing by, so I stay in the trees for the first few miles.

My apartment is a five minute drive from Rich's house, so that means the walk will be...too fucking long. Occasionally, when I emerge from the tree line, people hoot and yell at me as they drive past. Someone beams me with an empty beer can.

I have to walk through the parking lot of an hourly-rate motel. Trash is everywhere in the parking lot. Shutters are hanging at angles or lying on the cement in front of the windows. The storm screens are ripped in big gashes. A pack of mangy puppies peeks out and yips at me from beneath an old El Camino.

An obese woman in a stretchy green tube top and mini skirt is smoking a cigarette, standing near the road. She moves her eyes over me.

"Hey there. You lookin' for some fun?"

"No, no thanks," I tell her. "I'm all funned out for the evening."

"What happened to your head?"

"Nothing." I try to walk past her.

She moves in front of me. "Come on, baby. Let's have us

some fun.”

“No.”

“You got any money?”

I’m walking as fast as I can, trying to leave her behind, but she’s fallen in step beside me.

“I have no money,” I tell her. “I’m homeless. Please leave me alone.”

“You don’t look homeless. You look rich.”

“Well you’re a stupid whore, so what you think really doesn’t matter. Leave me alone.”

“Come on. Let’s have some fun.”

I stop and spin to face her. “You want money?”

She smiles. “Yeah, baby.”

“Alright. I’ll give you twenty dollars if you stand there with your arms behind your back and let me hit you in the face as hard as I can.”

“What?”

“Let me hit you in the face as hard as I can. Twenty bucks.” I pull out my wallet and wave it in front of her. “Come on, you fucking whore. You want some money, don’t you?”

“You’re sick, you goddam freak. What the hell’s wrong with you?” Her upper lip rises in disgust. “That’s the craziest thing anyone’s ever asked me, and I used to work in Mississippi.”

“Take it or leave it, bitch. Let me pop you one. Real hard. I bet you’ll like it.”

“You fucking pervert! Get out of here! Get! Go on now, or I’ll call the police.”

“Alright. Bye, bye.”

She walks away, muttering under her breath. I smile, happy with myself, and start back towards the apartment.

A patrol car comes down the road towards me, so I dive into some bushes. The car passes without slowing down, and, after the

adrenaline wears off, I realize I'm in a patch of briars. I curse life while plucking the long, piercing tentacles from my arms and clothes.

When I get home, I'm going to shoot up the biggest fix of heroin I can find. Hopelly, I'll die. I need to, now, before things get any worse.

\*

We're at a concert, seated in the orchestra pit at the Fox Theater, when I see her. I'm near orgasmic from the two dozen Lortabs I systematically ate - one every three minutes, snapped in half - on the Marta. After smoking a joint, I keep passing out in my seat while people around me shake me and scream over the music, "Are you okay? What did you take?" Rich just laughs and waves them away.

Swinging my head while Anastatio covers "I am the Walrus", I see her face - small nose and high cheek bones - studying me. She's two rows up, looking back. The purple and pink lights stroking her silver-white hair make me, briefly, hope she's just some opiate induced fantasy.

She's not.

My balls shrink and I drop to the floor, get stepped on twice, then stand back up and wave. She waves back. I have to use my strong, leather belt to cinch in the explosion of emotions coming from my chest. She smiles and turns back to the stage.

At intermission we go outside and stand together in the crowd of cigarettes. I haven't seen her since she moved out. Her shirt is tight and hugs her breasts, defines their shape. She looks great.

I'm sweating hard, probably stink. I pick at a cold sore in the

corner of my mouth.

“So what have you been doing?” Lisa asks.

“I have drugs,” comes from my mouth. Then, “Lortabs...” more quietly.

“Okay. I don’t want any.”

“I know.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m just really stoned. Sorry.” I wipe the strip of white flesh above my lip. “The music is great, though. I love...music.”

She laughs. “It’s good to see you.”

“You too.”

“Do you want to do something later? Catch up?”

“Okay.”

She takes a tissue from her purse and dabs at the sweat on my forehead. “They’re about to start again. Meet me out front after the show. We’ll eat. You better be there.”

“I am the anti-man,” I whisper to her back as she walks inside.

The rest of the concert is horrible. I explain to Rich that he needs to find another way home, then sit in nervous hell, my stomach bucking and growling at the thought of what’s to come.

The line at the restaurant is long, but I slip the maître d’ fifty bucks and he seats us at a table next to the bathroom. I’ve taken some amphetamines to even myself out, and now I’m not hungry, order calamari anyway.

“And I’d like a bottle of Sullen Springs water,” I tell the waiter. “A glass bottle. Don’t bother unless it’s in a glass bottle.”

“I don’t know what I want,” Lisa says, studying the menu.

“The fish is good here,” I tell her.

She orders the chicken parm. We drink yellowish wine. My legs shake. Lisa asks if I’m nervous.

“Just happy to be here,” I tell her, grinning through the sweat.



"I'm having a great time."

The waiters glide around the room with slick hair and dark, maroon vests. My ears are on edge, and the quiet padding of their footsteps as they pass monopolizes my attention. I try to count the number of leather tasseled loafers.

"Are you on speed?" Lisa asks.

"Why?"

"Earlier you were half asleep, but now you're acting like a fiend and ignoring me."

Her eyes have a way of looking up and to the side, as if there's something wonderful just over my shoulder that only she can see.

"No, of course not. I'm listening." I slather my face with intense concentration. "Tell me more about your new wallaby."

She knows me too well to let this distract her. "So, I'm doing a nursing internship with Dr. Bloom down in Savannah."

"Nice. That's very nice." I arrange my silverware in neat, vertical rows. "I'll have to hurt myself on River Street."

"Did you see what the President did today?" she asks.

I roll my fingers on the china white table cloth. "Yeah."

"Well? What did you think? Wasn't it terrible?"

"You know how I feel about everything the President does. There's no point talking about it."

"According to you there's no point living, but you still do that. So, let's talk about the President."

"I like to take advice from homeless people," I say, studying my empty plate, waiting for the coming food to fill it. "They're full of useful information. Did you know that you really don't need to brush your teeth? Or that plastic bags make great underwear?"

"Yes, you've told me all that before." She sighs. "I'm so fed up with this war."

"I think Hitler said that once, too," I stare at the floor. "I like the way the threads of this carpet break. They break to the north-

east.”

“I mean, why should I salute this President? What has he done to earn that kind of respect? These guys we’re stuck with aren’t Jeffersons or Eisenhowers. They’ve never created nations or led men into battle. We just elect the liars, crooks, and actors. Kennedys, Reagans, Bushes. Sons of bootleggers and war profiteers. We elect the most adept at manipulation and betrayal in their ego maniacal drives from power. And they want our respect?”

“You’re absolutely right.” I sip my water. “Excuse me.”

I go to the bathroom. The attendant gives me dirty looks while I throw back a fistful of pills, so I don’t tip him.

Walking back through the white and gold-papered hallway, a man stops and judges me with his eyes. He has a wave of hard, gelled blond hair and is wearing a green and orange bowtie.

“Hey man,” he whispers with darting glances around us. “You got any blow to sell?”

“Blow?” I laugh. “No, not to sell. But the bathroom attendant just sold me some. Primo stuff. Just give him the code word ‘Alabastair,’ and he’ll hook you up.”

“Thanks, bro.”

Back at the table, Lisa spills her water and tells me that she’s had too much wine.

“No such thing,” I say. “Besides, you’re not even puking yet.”

“Why’d you quit school, Reilly? You’re so smart.”

“No I’m not.” I avoid her stare. “How do you know I quit school?”

She laughs, “Everyone talks. I still care about you. I’ve kept tabs on you. So why did you quit?”

“It bored me. No, that sounds conceited. It just wasn’t for me.”

“What will you do? How will you get a job?”

“I’ve dedicated myself to depravity and excess.”

“You’ve been dedicated to those things as long as I’ve known you.” She takes my bottle of water and shakes it.

“Goddammit,” I say. “Now I can’t drink it. Why did you do that?”

She shrugs and goes on. “What will you really do?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“You have to do something.” She’s flustered now, with blushing, blood red cheeks. “You always shrug everything off or say it doesn’t matter, but it does. You can’t just act outside of society’s boundaries then try to live among us. It doesn’t work that way. It’s not fair.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s just not fair,” she says. “No one wants to work or follow the rules, but we do. We have to.”

“Except the few of us who live inside the anthill and do nothing., We do nothing while the other ants are too busy scurrying around to notice. They dig the tunnels and carry the food. I just lie around and fuck the queen.”

We leave the restaurant and walk through the city with closed eyes. I use her small, warm hand to guide me, but she’s as lost as I am. We take the quiet Marta train to my car, then drive to my parents’ house outside the city.

Everyone seems to be out of town. The house is dark and still. I punch in the code for the lock box and we go inside and fall onto my old bed.

“I’ve missed you so much,” she says, nuzzling my neck.

“You’re the one who left.”

“You lost your mind.”

“I still haven’t found it.”

“You were acting really weird at dinner.” She runs a finger along my chest. “Have you calmed down?”

"I suppose."

"I just want my Reilly back."

"I think he's gone."

She sits up and straddles me. "Let's not talk about this now."

She strips off her shirt and I slide my hands under her bra, rub my fingers one by one, back and forth, over her nipples. She sticks her tongue in my ear then whispers, "I want you to tie me up."

"What?" I ask.

"Tie me up."

"Why?"

"It's kinky," she moans, grinding herself into me.

"Oh. Can't we just have a threesome or something? There's a girl I can call."

"That's never gonna happen."

"Well, I don't have any rope."

"Find something."

I crawl off her and dig through my closet, grab two small ties that are remnants of my childhood. They're decorated with cartoon characters. I tie nooses around her wrists and fasten them to the bedposts.

"Fuck me!" she orders.

I enter her, begin to move in and out slowly. Her hands immediately come loose.

"Damn it, tie me up tight! So I can't get out!" She slaps my ass.

"Alright, alright. This is really a hassle," I mutter.

"Shut up."

I strap her down as tight as I can, but after a few more minutes of sex, she slips out again.

"Fuck!" She rolls away from me. "Just forget about it. Forgive me for trying to be a little wild."

I grab her and pin her down, then start to fuck her again,

powered like a God from the amphetamines. At some point, I have to get Lisa a towel to wipe off the sweat I'm excreting all over her face and breasts.

We fuck for hours, but, eventually, even through the speed, I feel my penis soften.

"Sorry," I tell her, trying to urge blood back into my cock.

"Don't stop. Come on!" She sticks her finger up my asshole.

"Come on, baby! Make me cum!"

"I can't. My heart's going to explode."

I pull her finger out of me and roll off her, take the drenched towel and mop my forehead. She pinches my nipple, flicks it with her tongue.

"Stop," I say. "It hurts."

"What does?"

"My cock. It hurts."

"You want me to finger it?"

"What?"

"Your cock. Do you want me to finger your cock?"

"Is that exactly what it sounds like?"

"Yes."

"Jesus fuck. Hell no. How would that even work?"

"I'd just slide my finger up that little slit." She dabs the top of my penis with a fingertip. "It's supposed to feel good for guys."

I gag and cover myself with the damp blanket.

"Holy hell. You've got those long fingernails and everything. Oh, God." I wince at the thought. "That's horrible."

"I just got a manicure." She wiggles her index finger, tipped with a curved glossy nail, in my face. "If you're gonna have something stuck up your urethra, this is it, baby."

"I'd rather be raped by a saber tooth tiger in front of Mother Theresa."

"Don't be a pussy."

"I'm gonna be sick. You've made me physically ill."

I go into the bathroom and wrench into the porcelain bowl. In my mind, fingernails and thin sheets of paper are slicing across the tip of my penis. I can't get the image to go away.

"I could shove jalapenos up your ass!" She calls from the bedroom. "Or Tabasco Sauce. That's supposed to get you up, too. It gets the blood flowing to your dick or something."

"Nothings going up any of my holes! Goddammit!"

I wash my face in the sink, then shriek when I see my penis in the mirror.

"What's wrong?" she yells.

"My dick's all bloody and torn up! Oh God, it stings. It stings really bad!"

"Why's it torn up?"

"Probably from fucking you for six hours."

"Sorry."

"That's okay. I kinda enjoyed it, tell you the truth."

I slide back into the bed, careful not to let anything touch my sore penis, then throw my arm around her and pull her close so that her head rests on me.

"I love you," I tell her. "I really, really love you."

She smiles. "I love you, too. I'm sorry I left."

"Me too." I pause, then ask, "Do you still have the ring?"

"Yeah. Do you want it back?"

"No. Maybe we'll need it after all."

She pulls away, turns so that her back's to me, and tells the wall, "Maybe."

In the morning she cooks breakfast - bacon with toast - while I bang away at my mom's old Steinway, playing a waltz by Waldteufel. We're still the only ones in the house. I have no idea where my parents are, or the maid. Lisa sets the table and calls for me.

Munching on a piece of burnt bacon, I smile across the table. Lisa winks at me.

"I never expected this to happen," I say.

"What?"

"Us...being together again, like this."

"Aren't you happy to see me?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I am. That's the problem. I shouldn't be around you. I don't know if I can handle it."

"Why?"

"Because you can crush me. I feel things for you that scare me. I care about you, and it scares me. I think you own me."

She laughs. "I own you? Are you kidding?"

"You know what I mean. You really killed me last time, when you left."

"I'm sorry."

"Then why did you leave?"

"I needed to be alone. I had to think some things over."

"What? Think what over?"

"It's too personal."

"You can talk about it with me. I've always told you that. It doesn't matter what it is."

"Not this. I can't talk about this with anybody."

"There's nothing that bad."

She rubs her toast in the runny egg yolk on her plate. "I don't want to talk about it with you. Not yet."

"So you'll tell me eventually?"

"Maybe."

"When?"

"I don't know. When it feels right."

"That's pretty vague."

"Let's just stop talking about it," she says. "I'm getting upset."

I sigh. "Okay. I'm just scared. You make me feel these things,

really good things. But when I lost you I hurt so much. Just...don't do it again."

She smiles, reaches across the table and takes my hand. "I won't. I love you."

"That's easy to say. It doesn't mean it's true."

She squeezes my hand. "Do you know that you're the only person in my entire life that I've told I love?"

"Really?"

"Yep."

"What about your family?"

"Never said it to them. Not my parents, my sister - no one."

"That's weird."

"Maybe. But do you understand how much it means when I say it to you? Only you. Forever."

I like the way that sounds.

\*

I spend Thanksgiving in the mountains, alone in a little rental cabin - smoking strong, floral opium and eating mushrooms, listening to music and sitting on the porch bundled in thick woolen blankets.

Everything is dead from the cold. Layers of brittle leaves break and crunch like gravel under my feet. My mother calls me once and leaves a message on my phone. I don't call her back.

Lisa is in Tennessee, spending the holiday with her family.

On the way home, I stop in Alpharetta and pick up Lee from his parents' house. His dad leans in the car window and glares at us as we're about to leave.



“You boys aren’t going to get in any trouble now, are you? No drugs.”

“No sir,” Lee promises.

I shake my head.

“Alright, here’s two hundred for gas and food.” He hands Lee a handful of bills. “You better not spend it on anything else.”

“Bye, Pops,” Lee calls out the window as we drive away.

The lot is small and dark. I park the car and a dozen dirty heads turn to study us. The area around us is stacked with chains of retail stores and restaurants.

“All these folks here for heroin?” I ask Lee.

“Probably. Doesn’t look like they want pizza.” Lee points at an emaciated man in battered clothes sitting and twitching on the low curb. “That guy looks like he’s got a damn gorilla on his back. Fucking King Kong,” he laughs. “You got any of that opium left?”

“Nope. Just some bud. We can burn it on the drive home.”

A mini-van pulls up and the band of addicts swarm. Lee says, “That’s him,” and climbs out of the car. I watch as the junkies take turns stepping up to the driver.

Someone knocks on my passenger side window and I jump. When I look over, a short, dirt-faced Mexican is staring back at me.

“Hello,” I say, rolling down the window.

“Hola,” he answers, raising his palm.

“How are you?” I ask him in Spanish. “What do you want?”

“Can I get in?”

“No.”

“Can I have a ride?”

“Where to?” I glance back to the van. Lee’s handing over the money.

“Anywhere,” the man says in Spanish.

Lee comes up beside him, taps him on the shoulder, nudges

him aside.

"Excuse me, *esé*."

"This guy wants a ride," I say, pointing to the Mexican.

"No. We've got stuff to do. Urgent stuff."

"I don't mind," the man says, still speaking Spanish.

"He says he doesn't mind," I tell Lee. He shrugs, his attention on the little bag of heroin. "Alright," I say to the Mexican. "Get in. What's your name?"

The man settles into the back seat, setting a worn gym bag down beside him. The smell of tacos and beans follows him in.

"Felix. My name is Felix."

"His name is Felix," I inform Lee.

"I got that much," Lee says, flicking the sack of heroin with his finger. "This bag look pretty good. Let's go to that video store down the street to do it."

I start the car and pull into traffic, wait for a light to change.

"You like smack, Felix?" I ask while watching him in the rear view.

"No, just marijuana."

I chuckle. "We got some of that too, my friend."

"What did he say about marijuana?" Lee asks.

"That he likes it."

"Cool. Tell him we have some."

"I already did."

We park outside the video store. Lee breaks out two big lines on a Flaming Lips CD case. I watch the people inside the store as they walk around, picking up movies and studying the covers.

Lee cuts a few inches from a plastic straw and uses it to vacuum up one of the lines, then hands me the straw and the case. I put the dirty white powder up my nose as Felix leans between our seats and looks back and forth.

"Bueno?" he asks.

"I don't feel it yet," I tell them both in English.

"It's not like shooting up," Lee says. "It takes a minute to kick in."

We leave the parking lot. I'm irritated, sure we've been ripped off, even though Lee is slumped in his seat, smiling with pleasure.

I stop at a gas station on the way to the interstate to buy a cheap cigar. As I pull open the store's steel-barred door, the heroin smacks me and a happy, opiate warmth envelopes my body. I feel myself grin.

I'm moving slowly. My vision is coming through a filter of non-existent smoke. When I get to the counter, I realize that I have no money, so, hunched slightly, I swagger back to the car and gather a handful of coins.

The clerk smiles at me as he hands me the cigar. I stare at him, can feel my mouth hanging open, then give him a little nod and go back to the car.

On the interstate, Lee uses a pocket knife to slice open the cigar and tosses the loose tobacco out the window, then begins breaking up the marijuana.

"So what's your deal, Felix?" I ask.

"I was just released from prison."

"Well...that would have been nice to know before I was trapped in a car with you," I tell him through the mirror.

"It was for not having a valid driver's license."

"Oh. That's okay then."

"They kept me there until I could pay the fine, but I had no money."

"How much money did you need?"

"One-hundred and fifty dollars."

"Are you kidding? That's fucking bullshit. How long did they hold you?"

"Three months. And four days."

“Holy shit. They kept you for three fucking months over a hundred and fifty bucks? I bet it cost fifty times that to keep you there. That’s why I don’t pay taxes.”

“What’s he saying?” Lee mumbles as he licks the brown tobacco skin.

“They kept him in prison for three months because he couldn’t pay a hundred and fifty dollar fine.”

“How’d he get out then?”

“How did you pay the fine, Felix?”

“My cousin brought me the money.”

“His cousin paid it.”

“When I returned to my home, my family was gone. The police had come and taken them. I still do not know where they have been taken. I am very scared for them.”

“Goddam! That’s fucking ridiculous. I fucking hate the government, Felix.”

“What the fuck are you two talking about?”

“They took his family away when he was in jail.”

“Bullshit!” Lee yells. “That’s just like the fucking Nazis, man! That’s fucked up. What kind of police state do they have us living in?”

“He says they took your family like the Nazis took the Jews,” I tell Felix.

“Yes, yes. My wife, my mother, my babies - all gone. How will I find them?”

“Don’t you worry, Felix. We have much heroin and marijuana and we will find your family. We are powerful white men!”

“Yes?” he asks.

“Oh shit,” Lee moans. “Policia.”

In the road ahead, three of the four lanes are blocked by police cars. Patrolmen are slowly waving traffic through the far lane, their glaring flashlights shining in drivers’ faces as they examine licenses.

“Lee, hide the drugs,” I order. “Felix, be cool, hombre. Com-  
prende? Be cool. Lee, there’s a .38 in the glove box. We might  
have to shoot our way out of this one.”

Lee’s face scrunches as he glares at me. “You’re a fucking idiot.  
Just relax.”

A flashlight taps on the window. I roll it down and show my  
license to the trooper. His strong white beam blinds me.

“Where y’all headed?” he asks me.

“Back home. Just...back home.”

The light moves to the backseat.

“What’s with the spic?”

“Givin’ him a ride.”

“Why?”

“Cause he needs one, I guess.”

“Where to?”

“Same place I’m going.”

“He got ID?”

“I dunno.”

The cop knocks on the back window.

“You got ID, Pepé?” he asks through the glass.

“Pepé’s French,” Lee calls to him, leaning across my lap.

“You want me to search this vehicle, smart ass?” the cop barks.

“I didn’t think so. Now shut the fuck up.” He eyes Felix again  
before saying, “Alright. Y’all get moving.”

“Thanks.”

I let out a breath as the lights shrink behind us in the car’s  
mirrors.

“That was bad,” Felix says in English. “Much fear.”

“I can’t feel fear right now,” Lee says and laughs. “I’m feeling  
alright.”

“Light that blunt,” I tell Lee.

The lighter sparks blue in the dark car, doesn’t catch, sparks

again, and dull yellow light flickers in Lee's hand.

Then I see the patrol car coming up behind us, lights screaming their horrible colors.

"Wait, wait, wait!" I yell. "Cops are back!"

"Shit." Lee throws the drugs under his seat.

Felix turns and watches as the cruiser closes in. I pull over, stop the car. Phantom handcuffs are already weighing down my wrists. There's a big Marta hub just up the road, nothing else but trees around us. We're all alone with the cops.

"I am scared," Felix tells us.

"Me too, amigo."

The cop saunters up slowly, taps my window again with his long black Mag Lite. Another trooper sidles up outside Lee's door.

"Yeah?" I ask after rolling down the glass.

"We're takin' the Mexican."

"What's that?"

"The little wetback. We're takin' him with us."

"Why?" I ask.

"What the fuck do you care, shit head? Tell the little spic to get the fuck out."

"They want you, Felix," I translate, then add, "I'm sorry. They have the power."

"No." Felix's eyes are wide.

"Now, amigo," the cop says, and, with a flick of his wrist, a baton periscopes out.

"No!"

"He seems pretty adamant against that, officer," I tell the cop.

"Shut the fuck up. Get out of the car now!" he screams at Felix, pulling at the locked door handle.

Felix, beginning to weep, finally steps out, pulling his gym bag with him. The cop grabs him by the collar and drags Felix into the weeds, then immediately begins beating him with the black baton.

The other officer turns and waves us away.

"Y'all go on now," he says.

There are screams and thuds coming from the weeds. The cop who's not swinging the baton looks on, laughs and cheers.

"They sure hate old Felix, don't they," Lee says.

"Looks like it."

We watch for a moment, squinting out the windows, then I put the car into drive and pull back onto the road, leaving the macabre laughter behind us.

"I think I'm gonna puke," Lee says.

"Why?"

"Because they're about to kill him."

"Are they?"

"Looked like it."

"Hmm."

"How does that not bother you? I'm on heroin and it's still making me sick."

"I'm the anti-man."

"Why do you think cops like beating on people so much?" Lee asks.

"I guess they don't have much else going on in their lives, enjoyment-wise."

"Yeah."

"I mean, if you're a vindictive enough asshole that you actually seek out a job that entails going around ruining people's lives all day, you have to be a pretty unhappy person."

"Yeah. I sure do hate those fuckers."

"Me too," I say. "Now light that blunt. We'll smoke one for Felix."

\*

I'm in the shower again - shaving - when my cock turns to red jello, falls off, and washes down the drain.

I shriek and falls to my knees, trying to scoop up the squishy remnants of my organ. It crumbles into jiggling little pellets that fall through my fingers and wash down the drain. I crash through the shower curtain and fall to the floor, trapped and struggling in the wet plastic net.

I free myself and stand dripping, check my reflection in the mirror, sigh when I find myself whole. Everything's right where it should be, hanging a little to the left.

I dress while watching a television interview with Richard Kuklinski, The Iceman - a mafia killer who butchered his victims and stored their frozen bodies in the same freezer where his children kept their ice cream. A line of cocaine goes up my nose after my shirt's on. Next comes a new pair of leather moccasins and a blunt.

This morning, the police killed a ninety-two year old woman as she slept in her home. and the president ordered another fifty-thousand troops into the war zone.

Someone's knocking at the door. I go downstairs and open it. James grins at me. He's big and brown, lean but muscular.

My mind immediately - subconsciously - flips through a series of memories like this: sharing a little rectangular desk the first day of kindergarten and offering him a Reese's Cup; playing baseball together while our parents cheer and our fathers share a six pack of domestic beer; the strange realization that James is my only friend who has never visited my home and vice-versa; my grandma picking me up from school, waving to James from the car while telling me how wonderful it is that I have a black friend; colliding on the



football field with a loud, painful crunch that sends adrenaline shooting through my blood and induces the most intense high I've experienced so far in my young life; cheating together on a high school math test; eating tiny paper squares of LSD while playing golf at the Country Club where we attract strange looks; attending the same college; watching James start as a freshman at free safety while, drunk on rum and a pounding head of speed, I scream my throat raw from the tall cascading stands.

These memories come and go in a fraction of a fraction of a second and I never really know they're there, but a happiness - some deep, subconscious happiness - accompanies them.

"What's up?" I ask as I lead him upstairs.

The blunt I was smoking is gone, so I fall on the couch and hand him the bong. The water gurgles.

"Shit," he coughs, exhaling. "Why can't you just smoke a blunt like a normal person?"

"I just finished one. I'm sorry that my sophisticated smoking gear confuses you so much." I reach under the sofa and pull out a porcelain stash box. "I've got some good stuff for you. Pure Sativa. Nice upper, clear headed weed. You can smoke it before practice and you'll be okay."

I cut open a cigar and begin working on another blunt. Beside the couch, there are two big recliners in my bedroom. James sits in one after turning on the TV.

"Alright, *Darkman*," he says, watching the screen.

We smoke the blunt. It burns toward our fingers quickly and becomes sticky with resin. When it's gone James gets up and goes into the bathroom.

"What the - what the fuck?" his muffled voice calls. "What the fuck is this?"

The bathroom door swings open and he's standing there, holding a tub of my Apricot Deep Facial Cleanser. "Hey buddy," he

says, waving it at me. "I'm pretty sure this makes you gay."

"I've got a problem with cleanliness - needing to be clean. Fuck you. That's like picking on a cripple."

"No shit, you've got a problem. Problem is you take dick up your ass. There's twenty bottles of shit like this in here. Bitch supplies."

"I can't help it. I feel dirty and greasy all the time. I have to shower like six times a day."

"Washin' all those dick off you."

"I hate you."

"When did this shit start?"

"I don't know. I've always had it, it's just got worse these last couple years. I guess you were too busy to notice, asshole."

"I still think you're gay."

"Goddammit, it's a serious problem. I'm on medication. My doctor says the showers are part of an obsessive compulsive disorder."

"Alright, whatever." He sits back down. "You coming to that party tonight?"

"What party?"

"Come on, man, I told you. Party in Atlanta."

"You driving?"

"Sure."

"Alright, I'll come."

We go back to watching the movie in silence. I have Fred at the apartment with me. He's beside the TV, sleeping on his back with all four legs splayed out. His tongue is hanging out and he snores loudly. It smells like he's farted.

"You know my cousin's gay," James says.

"Goddammit."

"He told me the girls just didn't pay attention to him, and he got hornier and hornier until he couldn't stand it no more. So

one day when a guy started hitting on him, he just went ahead and fucked him.” James shrugs. “He needed to fuck so bad he turned gay. Can you believe that? Been like that ever since. All ‘cause he couldn’t get any pussy.”

“You have no idea how gay works, dumb shit. Why do black people have such a hard time understanding homosexuality?”

He ignores me. “So...how long since you got some pussy?”

“Fuck you. You’re like a homophobic klansman.”

“That’s not even funny.”

I roll a joint and we pass it back and forth.

“If I pull out my dick right now, will you suck it?” James asks through a lung full of smoke and laughter.

“Jesus Christ.”

The drive to Atlanta takes three hours and eight joints that we smoke with the windows rolled up in the black Tahoe the football team leases to James for ten dollars a month. I call Lisa and leave her a message, telling her where I’ve gone.

When we arrive at the squat, two-level house, the small driveway is filled with cars. We have to park almost a block away.

People are packed inside. The house smells like old chicken soup and sweet grease. I’m one of only two white guys at the party. A light-skinned girl gives me a beer and a smile. I work my way to the center of the room.

James yells to me, “You gonna get laid tonight?”

I swallow two Xanax with a drink from the beer and shout back, “You know I don’t like to fuck black girls! The snatch is too greasy and matted!”

This draws looks. I smile and wave to the people staring at us. James pats me on the shoulder and whispers to me that I need to shut the fuck up. He moves away and I stand alone, despite the crowd.

Waves of hatred and self loathing crash against the wrinkled gray matter of my mind. I eat another Xanax and hope someone here will kill me.

Later, I'm drunk and looking for cocaine. I finally resort to calling Purp, the only coke dealer I still know in Atlanta, and agree to meet him at a parking lot in Five Points.

I find James and ask him for a ride. He's sitting on a couch with a cute girl with long legs who's massaging his thigh. James tells me that he's too fucked up to drive. I call him a pussy and the girl with him laughs, and, without taking her hand off James' thigh, calls over a short man in his thirties who tells me his name is Curtis.

After studying me with dark, suspicious eyes, he agrees to drive me in exchange for a few lines of powder. I agree, shake his hand and introduce myself. We leave the party.

In his car - a Bentley convertible that looks gray in the moonlight - we ride without talking, caught in the new, awkward silence that comes between strangers. The radio is playing that Neil Diamond song, "Heart Light". I look at Curtis and nod my head in approval.

Red and green lightning is flashing everywhere. I have to clutch the armrest with a tight fist as dread and anxiety comes like a weight. Did I take my medicine today? Did I take it yesterday?

"I just finished an interesting book," I finally say, hoping to distract myself..

"Oh yeah? What was it?"

"It was about theoretical physics. Higher dimensions and shit."

"I heard about that stuff at Morehouse," he says without taking his eyes from the road. "One of my fraternity brothers was really into it."

"It's crazy. Like, hurt your head crazy. We live in four dimen-

sions, right? Three that are space and one that's time. But now these physicists think there may be as many as eleven dimensions, but we just can't experience them all. Eleven! That's seven dimensions we can't see or comprehend beyond theory. There could be creatures or beings or whatever that live in those dimensions. They could be Gods! Or at least the closest things to Gods that exist outside our imaginations.

"Like, imagine pulling a fish out of the water," I go on, near rambling. "You would be ripping it through dimensions - from water to air. It's like...I don't know what it is exactly, I'm not smart enough. But it sounds like the most realistic higher power humanity could ever know."

"Why can't we seem them?" Curtis asks. "A fish can see us when we pull it out of the water, right?"

"Because when early humans evolved it wasn't necessary to see the other dimensions. We didn't need to see beyond three dimensions of space. We just needed to dodge saber tooth tigers and shit like that. And gauge time I guess. You know dogs can't gauge time.

"Yeah. I've heard that."

"They say we only use ten-percent of our brains. Maybe the other ninety-percent can see the rest of the world, the hidden dimensions. It's all around us, invisible until we find the right key to unlock it."

"That's bullshit - an urban legend."

"What is?"

"That we only use ten percent of our brains. They've scanned people's brains and proved we use it all."

"Well, what about the dimensions?"

"I dunno. It's an interesting concept, but you lost me at the evolution part."

"Huh?"

"I don't believe in evolution."

"Really?"

"I look at the world and see the hand of a divine creator. The complexity, the beauty - there had to be intelligence behind its design."

"So you believe in intelligent design."

"I guess. I don't really like to put labels on my beliefs."

"What about the scientific evidence? Everyone's entitled to their opinions, but yours is wrong. This is fact. It's like saying gravity is a myth. Or that global warming isn't happening. Although, I have more doubts about global warming than evolution at this point." I wave my hand in dismissal. "But whatever. It's not opinion at this stage of the argument. It's just fucking fact."

We stop for a red light.

"You worry about global warming?" Curtis asks.

"No. I think it's the natural way of things. Warming and cooling is the way of the earth. I don't think it will affect me in my lifetime. What about you?"

"I believe in it, and it scares me," Curtis says. "I think it will affect us in our lifetime, and I definitely don't want my kids to have to suffer because of my bad habits."

"You have kids?"

"Two."

"I just don't care about what happens when I'm dead. I don't even care about what happens when I'm alive as long as it doesn't affect me."

Curtis laughs. "You know that that makes you selfish and evil, don't you? It's really sad and pathetic."

"I'm the anti-man," I tell him.

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"It means that everything mankind supposedly represents - things like compassion and hope and love - I'm the opposite of. I

don't feel those emotions."

"Oh." He turns on the blinker and makes a left turn. "That's fucking stupid."

We meet Purp in the parking lot of a Piggly Wiggly. He chips off a chunk of cocaine from one of the four bricks in the back of his Jeep. I give him the money and we part quickly.

"So that guy just drives around with a bunch of yak in his car?" Curtis asks, once I'm back in the Bentley.

He pulls out of the parking lot and we head back to the party.

"That's his job," I say, bouncing the bag in my hand and fingering the cocaine through the thin plastic. "It's actually safer that way, or so he says. He usually just deals with big weight, but I've known him for awhile so he'll hook me up with a little zone sometimes. I went to his house once. It's nice."

"You bought an ounce?" Curtis asks, surprised. "I thought we were getting an eightball - quarter at the most. How much did you pay for that?"

"Five-fifty. But it's the best yallo that's been around here since the eighties."

We stop at an intersection and wait for the light.

I've just taken the first bump from the loose powder at the bottom of the bag when the terrifying, familiar red and blue lights begin to flash. This time, I know it's no hallucination. A second later the horrible scream of sirens joins in. My balls cower, tighten, and try to shrink up inside me.

"Fuck," Curtis says. The police lights are all over his face. Everything inside the car is cast in evil, swirling colors.

Then we see the patrol car - in front of us, across the intersection - and the relief is a good, cheap high. The cop speeds through the red light. A neon green motorcycle - a crotch rocket - gets caught in the cop's path and the driver has to twist his throttle to

a collision.

The bike's front tire rises up in a wheelie. The girl sitting on the tiny seat behind the driver falls off the motorcycle and slams to the road. Her head - no helmet - hits the road. The back of her skull flattens to fit the pavement. Even from inside the Bentley, we can hear the smack of her head against the road.

The motorcycle whines and jets away into the night, leaving the woman behind.

The cop jumps out of his car and runs to the to the woman. He kneels next to the body, then yells into his radio, gets back in his cruiser, and takes off after the bike.

"Holy shit," I say, gaping at the scene. "Holy fucking shit."

The girl is in the middle of the intersection, motionless. People leave their cars and run to help her, screaming as they point in the direction the motorcycle disappeared.

"Should we go check on her?" Curtis asks.

"Fuck no. Let's get out of here."

Curtis tuns the car around and we take side roads to get around the accident.

"I can't believe that guy just left her," I say. "That was really fucked up. Really, really fucked up."

"Panic, man. The sight of a policeman makes people do all kind of stupid shit."

"He scared the shit out of me," I laugh and go back to sniffing the powder.

"Me too."

"I fucking hate cops," I tell him while wiping my nose. "I'd be happy to execute everyone of those mother fuckers."

"Really?"

"Hell yeah. I know they have families and kids and shit, but fuck 'em. They ruin people's lives everyday for the most ridiculous reasons. They say they're just doing their job, but fuck that. They



choose their profession knowing exactly what they're getting into."

I let out a pleased moan as the cocaine begins to work. "It terrifies me that we happily arm the ego-maniacal morons who got straight C's in high school, then teach them that they can shoot us whenever they want." I slap the armrest. "And I'll be damned if they don't want to most of the time. How fucked up is that?"

"You might just hate those sons bitches as much as I do."

"I promise you, I do. If not more."

"I doubt that." Curtis glances at me. "A cop killed my sister." He holds his hand towards me. "Let me have some of that coke."

I give him the bag and ask, "Really?"

"Yup. Sheriff's deputy from Laurens County." He pours a small pile of the cocaine into his palm. "Raped her and killed her."

He buries his nose in the powder, then licks up the rest. "This shit is good."

"Shit, man. That's no good at all. Did he get the death penalty?"

"In a way." He hands the bag back to me.

"What's that mean?"

"He walked on the charges. No time served."

I wiggle my jaw. It makes squishy flesh-against-bone noises - the result of too many nights grinding my teeth on speed.

"That's total bullshit. Cops get away with so much shit."

"He didn't get away with this." Curtis glances at me again.

"Can I tell you a secret? Something I've never told anyone?"

"Me? You just met me, and you want to tell me a secret no one else knows?"

"You make me comfortable. And I don't think anyone would believe you if you tried to tell them. Besides, I want to tell someone. I think I need to. It's been building up inside me."

"Alright. You can tell me. I won't tell anyone else."

"No matter what happens?"

“No matter what.”

“I killed the cop. The one that raped my sister. I fucking tortured him to death.”

“Bullshit. You’re just fucking with me. Is your sister even dead?”

“I’m not joking. My sister is dead. I had to identify the body. She was on this metal table and I had to look at her through a big plate glass window. Her head was all purple and had this big dent in it.” There’s a flat tone to Curtis’ voice.

“Fuck...”

“I waited three years after it happened, then I kidnapped him and hung him up from the ceiling in my basement with handcuffs and chains. I shot him full of LSD and amphetamines and played a tape of white noise and people screaming and dying and a bunch of automatic weapons fire and explosions. He freaked out. I laughed the whole time.”

I don’t say anything. I’m not sure how Curtis wants me to react.

“I used a three-inch paring knife to cut off his cheeks. I could see his teeth and gums through these nasty ragged holes in his face and the blood was real dark and it gushed everywhere. He kept screaming but he couldn’t pass out because of the speed. Then I fed his cheeks to my dog.” Curtis is reciting the words as if they’re a well rehearsed monologue.

“hat’s real fucked up.”

“I talked to him for awhile after that, teasing him with a gun. I told him all about how good my sister was, and how he ruined my family when he killed her. I didn’t want him to bleed to death before I was done, so after an hour or two I drove the little blade into his shoulder until I felt it hit bone, and I thanked him, thanked him for protecting and serving. For protecting me against people like him.

“Then I cut off his arm. It took a long time, especially when I got down to the tendons and bones and shit. He finally did pass out. Blood was everywhere, I mean everywhere. Covered everything. It was real hot and made the whole room smell salty. I woke him up again and let him bleed out while he was conscious. He cried and begged like a bitch.”

“You didn’t get caught?” I ask. “You killed a cop and didn’t get caught. That’s crazy.” I sweat and think, tapping my fingers nervously on my thigh. “So he raped your sister and killed her, and you got him back.” I decide to agree with Curtis. “I guess that’s alright. Tit for tat and all that bullshit.”

“You’re not going to say anything, are you?” Curtis asks. “You’re not all freaked and and thinking you should do the right thing and tell somebody?”

“I told you I wouldn’t. Besides, I don’t even know your last name. Don’t worry. I rarely do the right thing, anyway.”

“Alright. Good. I’ve been waiting to tell all that to somebody. Thanks for listening.”

“No problem,” I tell him quietly.

“The crazy things is that killing that guy never made me feel better. That’s the fucked up part. That’s fucked up, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, man...that’s fucked up.”

“I mean, I got revenge, right? So I should be happy. But...it just doesn’t...make it any better.”

He stops the car in the middle of the road. Traffic begins to pile up behind us. “There’s something I gotta do now,” he says. “It won’t take long.”

He leans across me, opens the glove box and takes out a pistol. It’s hard to see the gun in the darkness.

The barrel goes in his mouth. His teeth bite down.

“What--” I start.

Flash.

The shot fills the car with hot blood. It splatters onto the bare skin of my forearm. The gun is loud, deafening.

Curtis' body slumps forward and hits the steering wheel. It drives the gun further into his head, so that the muzzle peeks from the big hole in the back of his skull. Loose white teeth, glued with gore to the headrest, glow in the soft light of the dash lights.

"Fuck."

People start getting out of their cars - the cars stopped behind us. The traffic coming the other way is slowing down, the drivers peering from their windows as they pass.

I wipe the bag of coke clean of prints and fling it as far from the Bentley as possible. I drag my arm across the leg of my pants, trying to clean myself. The blood smears along my skin like dark paint.

I lean back, trying to avoid looking at the body next to me, and wait for the police.

\*

"And I want to get Fred a camouflage collar," Lisa says as I pull the Audi into a parking space.

"Camouflage? Why?" I turn off the engine and turn to look at her.

"Because he's a little hunter dog. He should have a camouflage collar so everyone knows how tough he is."

I get out and open her door. "I guess we can do that. He doesn't like wearing a collar, though."

She checks her face in the visor's mirror, adjusts her hair, then takes my hand and pulls herself up. "He needs to wear one. If he goes off the property sniffing at something and someone finds him,

a collar will let them know that he belongs to someone.”

“Okay. We’ll go by the pet store on the way home.”

“Good.” She stretches herself up and kisses my cheek. “Let’s go.”

We’re in Savannah, on River Street. I felt romantic, so I’ve brought her here for a nice meal and some shopping.

“Let’s go to the bar first,” I say. “I want to get one of those drinks.”

Lisa laughs. “The one with all the liquor in it? What do they call it? I know it’s something funny.”

“Call A Cab.”

“Yeah, that’s it. I’ll get one too.”

We make our way down the long, wide street, holding hands and watching the ships move down river. The street is paved with old bricks. Occasionally, I have to catch Lisa as her heels catch in the cracks and they try to trip her.

Street performers are around, juggling, playing instruments, keeping their eyes on the hats or cups they use to collect their tips. Most the people here are carrying plastic cups of beer. The atmosphere is alcoholic.

We stop in front of the bar - a cheesy chain restaurant - and I go inside and order three of the strong, frozen drinks. Back outside, I hand Lisa one and keep the other two for myself, one in each hand.

“You’re supposed to walk outside me,” Lisa says, sipping at the red liquor-slushy through a straw.

“What?” I look down at my feet.

She glances at me and smiles. “You’re walking inside of me, closer to the stores. I’m right next to the road. We’re supposed to switch, so you’re near the road.”

“Oh.” I slow down and use my arm to guide her inside me.

“Why’s that?”

"You've never heard of that? It's just polite."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I guess so if a car comes you'll get hit first," she giggles.

"Oh." I watch the slow stream of tourists' cars passing by.

"That's a comforting thought."

"How do you not know that?"

"I don't know. My parents made me go to these etiquette classes when I was little, but they never told us that."

"What's an etiquette class?" She loops her arm inside mine. "I mean, I can guess what it is, but why did you have to go?"

"All my friends had to go. My brother and sister did too. They teach you how to ballroom dance and what forks to use and the right way to stand at a formal party and all that useless shit. It's just something our parents made us do."

"Well they should have taught you how to walk with a lady." She looks inside the window of the restaurant we're passing, then back to me. "If a car came at us, you'd push me out of the way and get hit, right?"

I stare at her. "I guess. Of course I would."

"You'd die for me?"

"Sure. Sounds as good a reason to die as any."

She gives my arm a weak punch. "You sure know how to warm a woman's heart."

I chug down what's left of the first of my frozen daiquiris, clutch my forehead for a minute as the brain freeze tries to destroy me, then toss the plastic cup into a trash can.

"Let's go get some candy."

"Okay."

The store is only half a block away, and we get there quickly. The big glass storefront windows look into the candy shop, where workers in hair nets are mixing ingredients in big copper vats,

pouring out thick brown syrups, and sorting the thin, brittle, pecan pralines. I hold open the door for Lisa and we go inside. She heads straight for the fudge and has the big black woman behind the counter cut her off a square from the pan. She takes the little bag and turns to me with a smile.

“Do you want anything?”

“I don't know.” I look around, sipping at my drink. “No, I'm okay.”

I pay for Lisa's fudge and we go back outside. A huge freighter is slowly floating past. We walk across the street and lean against the railing, studying the shipping containers stacked on the ship's deck.

“What do you think is in there?” Lisa asks.

“Probably something boring.”

“I bet there's fancy cars and big pieces of machinery.”

I squint over the water. “Maybe.”

In a toy store located at the top of a steep staircase, we play with intricately constructed kites and I read the the boxes of model planes. Lisa disappears, telling me she wants to look around the back.

I pick out a model kit of a WWII plane, grab a tube of model glue and some paints, then wander to the back of the store. Lisa's sitting on a big rubber ball, her drink on the floor, bouncing wildly and laughing.

“Let's get this!” she cries when she sees me.

I smile down at her. “Let me try.”

I put the model supplies down and take her place on the ball. There's a little rubber handle growing from it, and I take hold and begin to bounce. The thing shakes me like a paint mixer, and I can feel the alcohol swirling around inside me, pounding through my veins as my heart rate goes up.

"This is fun," I tell her, finally standing up, somewhat woozily.  
"I want to get this model plane too."

"Okay."

We walk back to the car, me juggling the bag from the toy store and my drink in one hand while holding the big ball in the other. Lisa's practically skipping.

Near the parking lot, there's a big hotel that has a suspended walkway that stretches across the street. As we enter the dark tunnel underneath it, Lisa grabs my neck and pulls me down to her, giving me a long kiss.

"Love you," she says.

"Love you too. Where should we eat?"

"Wherever you want."

"It's up to you," I tell her.

"Okay...Crab Shack?"

"Sounds good to me."

I weave the Audi through the tangled Savannah streets. Big trees line the roads, their long, drooping arms stretching down as if to tickle us.

We take the bridge that leads out to the beach and Lisa packs a bowl of marijuana. I turn on a Frank Zappa CD and we smoke while watching the water, the big white cranes standing in the shallows, and the fields of green grass that grow from the wet marshes.

At the restaurant, we get a table outside on the deck. The sun is setting, and the light glares off the water. The waitress bring us a bucket of beers, and we order fried clams and oysters. Lisa slips her foot out of its shoe and rubs it against my leg.

"Remember Valentine Day two years ago?" she asks, smiling softly.

"No."

"When we took acid and went to the botanical gardens."



“Oh yeah. That was great.”

“I hated it. You told me you were going to bring me down here and we would eat someplace fancy then go sleep on the beach.”

“I made reservations downtown.”

“But instead we just dropped acid.”

“It was really good stuff. Lee brought it over when you were at soccer practice and wanted to do some. I couldn't say no.”

“Of course you couldn't.” She pops a clam strip into her mouth. “Well, today makes up for that.”

I put my hand over hers and give it a squeeze. She leans across the table and uses her free hand to brush the bangs off my forehead.

I squint out over the water and watch the sun fall into the ocean.

\*

Earlier, the children who live in the house through the woods rode over on their four-wheeler. We watched Sponge Bob and I laughed and ate little squares of LSD. The kids explained Pokemon to me but I didn't understand. They grew frustrated, then went into the front yard and jumped on the rusty trampoline I have there and played with the dogs. Afterwards, I fed them homemade peach ice cream which they dripped onto the counter in short sticky trails.

They left at dusk.

Lisa showed up in her little blue Jetta. The dogs barked excitedly and ran in circles with their tongues wet and hanging from their snouts.

“Oh my babies.” She scratched their heads and sat down to play with them. “I’ve missed you babies so much.”

We ate more LSD then waltzed small circles in the dark kitchen. She used my laptop to paint colorful psychedelic pictures that just looked like random scribbles to me, but I told her they were amazing.

She had a white ribbon in her hair that swung and moved around like a worm. A man in a raccoon mask walked past the window and looked in. I shouted, “Leave us alone!”

We fucked on the floor. When I was on top of her, moving up and down, cat ears grew from her head and I thought I saw a flickering tail on the sheet below her. I lost my erection.

We laid next to each other on the floor and watched the lights our minds constructed in the darkness.

“I love you more than anything in this world,” I whispered, enjoying her warmth next to me.

“I love you, too.”

We listened to Stop Making Sense and smoked bowls of marijuana from my Celebration Pipe, then finger painted each other with sticky dark chocolate. Lisa went home, telling me that she had an early class in the morning.

The phone rang later as I was banging out chords on my piano. My brother said my name, long distance from Oxford.

The conversation was not good.

\*

My father died six or seven days ago. He was alone in his office - something to do with his heart. It just stopped while he sat there at his desk. He died in front of the big window that looks

out on the towers of bright downtown lights.

They said it was quick, but I doubt it.

My mother called me, crying and looking for comfort.

I was doing nitrous, so when I answered the phone my voice was low and hollow. I listened, then we hung up.

The cemetery is windy and cold, winter gray. People in black are everywhere. Tears and steamy clouds of breath. Men in blood red suits watch me from the hedges, talking into their wrists occasionally. I'm sure they're here to kidnap me. I blink and the suits turn a Twainish white. Blink again and they're gone.

The air smells a strong shade of purple. I stand next to the empty grave, stare down at the broken orange clay.

The coffin is under a beige tent a few yards away. Music is playing somewhere, probably just in my head. My mother is screaming and bawling. I kick a rock and watch it tumble into the hole.

I'm supposed to be feeling something right now.

"You came," my sister says from behind me. She walks up and rubs my arm.

She's tall and thin, with pale skin that's turning blue in the cold. A few freckles dot her nose. She's wearing a black dress.

"Yeah. I didn't have anything else to do."

"Heartless ass," she scowls

"Okay."

"I already miss him."

"Yeah." I pick at my lip, chapping in the air. "I don't think I do. He was real fat anyways, the last few years. It's not really that surprising."

"Don't talk like that."

"He had cirrhosis. It was just a matter of time."

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"You know."

"Fuck you. Don't try to use that shrink shit on me. There's nothing more wrong with you than anybody else. You just give in to it all and act pathetic. You use it as an excuse for all your crap."

"Okay. Is that a sealed casket?" I ask.

"What?"

"A sealed casket. They sell them and say that the seal keeps out bugs and shit. But all it does is keep in the gases that come from the rotting body. Then the gases build up all this pressure and the coffin explodes."

"I hate you." She steps away.

"I know." I wipe the snot from my nose and light a stale cigarette. "Why do we have to bury him? Let's throw his body off a cliff or something. Into the ocean."

"Jesus."

"He loved to sail. He'd probably like to decay in the ocean."

"No, he wouldn't. Stop talking about it. You're upsetting me. Nanny's here. Pretend to be sad when you talk to her."

"I will. I am."

"No you're not."

"Maybe I am."

"Shut up," she snaps.

"Leave me alone."

She starts to cry and snifle. "I'm gonna go sit with Mama."

"Okay."

They suspend the coffin over the hole with straps and a winch. I like the way it seems to float. When they lower it, my brother cries and turns away. When the box hits the bottom it shakes and rattles.

Everyone in my family throws in a handful of dirt while the spectators watch. My palm is gritty and rough. I have to hold

Nanny's arm. She's shivering and sobbing, holding a yellow lily clutched in a fist

"It's okay, Nanny," I tell her. "I'm still here."

She wraps her arms around me and rests her head on my chest. I feel the stem of the flower break against my back. "I want my baby back," she weeps.

"It's...okay," I tell her again.

"Where's Sister?" Nanny asks.

"She's over there," I say and withdrawal an arm from her hug and point to my sister.

"Call her over."

"Sister," I yell. Everyone turns to look. My sister glares.

"Come here. Nanny wants you."

Sister walks over and Nanny grabs her. The Tulip's head breaks off and falls to the ground. The women hold each other and cry.

A man is walking towards us. He's wearing black shorts. Mechanical legs grow from his thighs and end in brown loafers. The legs are a jumble of metal bars and plastic tubes. They move in jerks as he pulls them up with his thighs.

"What the fuck is that?" I ask.

"Oh. That's Sean," Sister says. "He works with me at the firm."

"Why is he here and what the fuck is wrong with his legs?"

"Language!" Nanny barks through her sobs. She slaps my arm.

"I think he likes me," Sister says. "I told him not to come."

"And his legs?"

"I don't know. He was born without any or something, so he has those things." She points to the robot legs.

"Wow. I've never seen a cyborg before."

"Be nice to him."

"Hi, Sister," Sean says with a wave as he jerks toward us.

"Hi, Sean." Sister dabs at her eyes with a tissue. "You came."

How did you find the place?"

"I looked it up in the paper." He smiles. "There was an announcement."

"I like your legs," I break in.

He looks at me for the first time. His hair is buzzed to a flat top that rises from his skull. He's muscular - big arms and big thighs that look thick under his shorts. He stands still, balancing on the artificial legs.

"They didn't cover them with fake skin or anything, did they?" I ask, staring.

"No," he says.

"Wow. That's crazy."

"You look like a nice young man," Nanny tells him.

"Thank you," Sean says and moves toward her with his arms out. "Are you Sister's grandmother?"

Nanny backs away from him, holding her arms out to keep him away. "Don't get too close," she tells him. "I don't want those things to go crazy and start kicking me."

"They can't move on their own," he tells her.

"Just the same." Nanny frowns, gives him a last glance and walks away holding her flower stem.

"Can I touch them?" I ask as I flick the cigarette butt.

"No."

"Come on! I bet they're all frosty from the cold air. Maybe if I lick one my tongue will stick to it."

"Stop, Reilly," Sister says.

"So why don't you have legs?" I ask.

He looks at Sister then back to me, forcing a smile. "I was born without legs. My parents were drug addicts."

"So you don't have legs? Because you're parents did drugs?"

"Apparently. The doctors told me the umbilical cord got wrapped around my legs in the womb."

"Huh. That really sucks for you."

He eases towards Sister, clunking up and down. "Not really. I have a great life. I have a college degree and a great job. And I was a wheel chair racing champ."

I nod my head. "Yeah, but isn't that just the shit you tell yourself to get through your day? Wouldn't you rather have human legs? You can't really be happy on those robot things. You're kind of a freak."

"You're kind of an asshole, aren't you?" Sean asks.

"Yes, he is," Sister says.

"You have to still be a virgin, right?" I continue.

"No, of course not."

"Are you kidding me?" I laugh. "Someone actually had sex with you? Holy shit. It must have been a fetish thing or something."

"I'm getting sick of this." He puts his hands on his hips.

"I mean, who would want some no-legged guy crawling up the bed toward them? You'd look like a soldier squirming under barb wire on your elbows. That would freak me out. I guess you could get in a bunch of crazy positions, though."

"Please stop this," Sean says.

"Stop what?"

"Making fun of me."

"I'm not making fun of you. We're just talking. I think you and your robot legs are fascinating."

"You're mocking me."

"I just think it's unusual that an uninvited robot man showed up at my father's funeral."

"Sister invited me."

"Whatever." I take the pewter flask from my coat pocket and nurse the neck.

Dylan, my brother, walks over. He looks just like me: tall,

blond, pale, but his teeth are straighter and he's not as fat yet. He grabs the flask and throws it to ground.

"What the hell is wrong with you? Don't drink at the fucking funeral, asshole," he hisses.

"Shut up," I snap. "Aren't you supposed to be in Russia?"

"What the --" He lowers his voice. "What the fuck does that matter now?"

"Just curious."

"I leave next month," Dylan says, distracted as he notices Sean.

"At least pretend you have feelings," Sister tells me. "People are looking."

"So now you two want to guilt trip me. That's great. Where were you assholes at the last party? Dad was upset you weren't there."

They answer too quickly. Their words fight and trip over each other to be heard.

"I had a big case," Sister says. "I can't be driving down here every time Momma and Daddy throw a party."

"I was in Oxford. You want me to hop the pond for one of those stupid parties?" Dylan asks.

"Shut up, you faggot," I tell Dylan. "Hop the pond? You're a goddam American, talk like one."

"Don't call me a faggot," he warns. "I'm tired of your shit. Always picking on me."

"Faggot," I say again, even though I could care less which hole Dylan chooses to stick his dick in.

"I'll fucking kill you one day," Dylan tells me quietly.

"Faggot!" I yell. "My brother is a goddam faggot!"

"Stop!" Sister scolds. "You'll upset Daddy."

"He's dead, you stupid bitch." I point into the grave and scream, "That's not Dad. That's just a pile of rotting flesh!"

I bend over and pick up the flask, then turn just in time to



meet the big fist that smashes my nose.

I fall.

From the grass, I look up at the cripple hovering over me.

"Have some respect," Sean says. "This is a funeral. I don't want you to upset Sister."

"Oh, you motherfucker. I'll knock those freak legs right out from under you."

I get up and he hits me again.

I stay down.

Nanny is wailing. I look to the left, down at the casket. It's a fine stained oak. Rain sprinkles down. It splatters against the shiny wood. I look to the right. One of Sean's big fake feet is standing on the yellow tulip blossom. It's crushed dirty and flat beneath his sole.

I cry.

When I was sixteen, my therapist explained to me why I am the way I am. He told me that most humans live inside bubbles. The bubble is the idea, the belief, that drives a person forward.

Examples:

Young children's bubbles keep them striving for good grades in elementary school. They're certain that a bad grade will disappoint their parents.

Middle school, many of these original bubbles burst. The young adult drifts. Hygiene is forgotten, school dismissed, old goals made obsolete.

High school, a new bubble has formed. Acceptance is desired and the need to belong pushes them towards dressing well, succeeding in school and society, getting into a good college.

College, the idea that a good job and a nice house will produce happiness is enough to make them study and work hard. This is usually the final bubble, and will last for years, maybe a lifetime,

until, sometimes - usually at mid-life - it too bursts, and an existential crises is experienced, the therapist told me.

These bubbles, these beliefs, are what pushes humanity forward. These bubbles give us hope.

My bubble, the therapist explained, was permanently destroyed sometime early in life. I live with no beliefs or ideals. Nothing holds purpose or significance. I have nothing to look forward to, no God to look up to, no afterlife for which to earn salvation. The belief in something - anything from religion to a career - is essential to happiness, or so the therapist said.

As I was then and am now, I can hope for no release. He told me that it's courageous to deal with the ideas I deal with, that compared to most people's problems, I'm on a whole different plane.

Yet, unless a compromise can be made, it is ultimately self-destructive and impossible to exist the way I do. He said I was stubborn, honest, in the truest way possible, and that it was my curse.

Not being able to believe.

I left the funeral and made the three hour drive home. I sat out back and used a little plastic wand to blow big soapy orbs. I watched the bubbles float through the air and catch the light in rainbows while the grass screamed for me to kill myself.

I followed the bubbles as they drifted, sometimes using my finger to pop them. No matter how big or tough they were, after a moment - even without my help - they always burst with a wet pop and a small mist of bitter soap. I watched the bubbles and wished -

\*

My left testicle feels smaller than my right, but it might just

be the way I'm holding my balls. There's a fire burning. Its flames send lashing light around the room that dances and plays like sickly faggots against the white walls. The heat dies long before it reaches me on the couch. I can't remember the last time I slept.

Music? Peter Gabriel's *Secret World*.

The dogs are sprawled around the bare brick hearth. I'm naked and alone in the house. An empty bottle of wine is on its side, sticky burgundy residue rims my lips. I want to pass out but can't, even after swallowing three Xanax and an Ambien that put me into a hypnotic state. The dark, bruised spot on my face throbs through the drugs.

Note to self: avoid fights with cyborgs.

Paul is at Ole Miss and won't be back for days. I spent the day alone, outside in the terrible cold, smoking ribs on the grill while wearing a bright red sweatsuit and a black wool jacket that now stinks of sweet, burnt apple wood. It was a good day for warm scotch.

Lisa keeps calling, wanting to comfort me in my grief. I'm scared to tell her I have none. The walls whisper "Die" again and again.

After falling twice I stumble into the glaring white bathroom and fill the tub. The swirling, hot water evaporates and coats everything with a slick layer of steam. I vomit into the toilet, then splash into the water.

As it scalds me, I contemplate masturbation again, but ultimately leave my dick untouched - flaccid and bobbing towards the ceiling.

The ribs and alcohol are trying to leak out my asshole but I clench my cheeks tight. Toenails click against the hardwood in the hall. Lucy sticks her head through the doorway, inspects me with inquisitive brown eyes, then leaves.

I think about killing myself - cutting my wrist and dying in

a bright crimson tub would be romantic - but the thought of the slim razor slicing through my flesh and veins makes me cringe.

Besides, it's either too late at night or too early in the morning for death, and someone has to feed the dogs.

It's a Thursday - no - Friday.

\*

We're getting dressed to go eat when the cops kick down the door. Actually, they knock and wait until Rachel, Lisa's roommate, turns the handle, then they kick the door so hard that it shoots back and smacks her in the face.

"Shit," I moan, my jeans down around my knees.

"Get on the ground, motherfuckers! Down! Down! I will fucking shoot you, you pieces of shit! Get down!"

A big man with a cop mustache and "K-9" plastered on every article of clothing he's wearing runs in. He stands over me and points a black pistol at my face, screams: "Where are the drugs, asshole?"

I manage, "Um--" before he lifts me up and punches me in the stomach. He drags me into the living room. The handcuffs he locks on my wrists are cold and heavy, so tight they cut off the circulation. I curse him through the pain. The faint smell of marijuana still clings to the air.

"Where are the drugs, shit head?" the cops asks. "I would love nothing more than to ass rape your little girlfriends and shoot you in the fucking face, so you better talk, cocksucker."

"What drugs, man?" I scream. "What drugs?"

"We know you have drugs in here. We received an anonymous marijuana complaint about this apartment. I can still smell it."

“Anonymous marijuana complaint?” I cry. “There’s such a thing as an anonymous marijuana complaint? What asshole made that up?”

Lisa and Rachel are next to me now. The cops are tearing apart the furniture, throwing everything off the shelves, tipping over the television with a screen-shattering crash.

“They need a warrant,” I tell Lisa loudly. “Tell them to go get a fucking warrant.”

“Shut your goddam mouth!” the cop with the mustache spits in my face. “You think you’re a fucking lawyer?”

“Well, I do watch a lot of Law and Order.”

He kicks me, then grabs my hair and pulls back my head.

“Say another fucking word and I’ll bring my dog in here and have him bite off your fucking balls.”

“Alright,” I say. “Sounds fair enough.”

They find my pipe and a little nugget of bud under Lisa’s bed, crow triumphantly, “We got it! Marijuana!”

“Alright, you’re all going to jail,” The mustached cop tells us.

He marches me and the girls down to his car.

Relieved they failed to find the two ounces of bud I left Tupperware’d in the freezer, I ask, “So you just invade harmless citizens’ homes, beat and shackle them, then take them away to jail. That’s great. What a great country. Hey, fucker, when do I get my pipe back? I had it custom blown.”

The cop doesn’t answer.

They push me into the holding cell. Six dark faces turn to appraise me with bored glances. There are four gray metal bunks bolted to the wall, no windows except a little square of glass set in the big steel door. I sit on a bench and stare back at the others.

They’re all bigger than me. A skinny teenager - twitchy - moves to the door and stares out the tiny window into the empty

hallway.

"I'm Tyrese," a thick, muscular man says and sits down next to me. "What you in here for?"

"Possession. Marijuana."

"Man, that's some bullshit. What's your name?"

"Reilly, I'm Reilly."

"What's up, man." He picks at a scab on his forearm. "I just got transferred here from Snellville. These cock suckers want to lock me up for twenty years. You believe that shit?"

"What did you do?"

"Goddam bullshit manslaughter charge, man. I was robbin' a house and had to shoot some mother fucker in the face."

"Oh. Well that's no good."

Tyrese spends the next hours explaining to me the subtle nuances of the local prisons: who has the best pillows or mattresses or food or basketballs.

When our dinner comes, everyone gathers on the bench, hunched over the Styrofoam trays that we rest in our laps. Fried chicken, white rice, beans, a roll. I eat my roll and sip at the bright red drink that comes in a little plastic cup.

"You want this?" I offer my tray to Tyrese.

"Nah man, that's your food. Eat up."

"I'm not hungry. Besides, I should be out soon. Doesn't sound like you will be."

The gratitude in his face is real. "Thanks man. You're straight, Reilly, you're straight, man. You ever need any help, you let me know."

"Thanks."

There's an intercom on the wall with a button that lets us talk to the guards. I push it over and over, chanting, "This is Reilly Reynolds, let me the fuck out."

No answer.

Later, the door opens and a boy is pushed in, followed by a guard.

“Who’s Reynolds?” the obese black guard asks.

“That’s me,” I say, rising hopefully.

“Push that intercom again, I’ll fucking kill you.”

Behind him, I can see Lisa down the hall, peeking through the glass window in the door of the women’s cell. I wave. She waves back and begins to mouth something, but the door closes before I can understand what she’s trying to tell me.

“Them guards are assholes, man,” Tyrese tells me. “I’ve been asking for a shower for two weeks now but they won’t give me one. I’m dirty as fuck!”

“You’ve been in this holding cell for two weeks?” I ask.

“Just about. I just want a fucking shower, man.”

“I’ve always heard prison guards got a big head trip going,” I tell him. “I saw a study a few years ago, some professor divided his class into two groups and simulated a prison environment. He made one group the guards and the other group the prisoners. You know what happened?”

Tyrese shakes his head no.

“In two days the guards had the prisoners doing all kinds of sick shit. Drinking urine, rape, beatings, all that fucked up shit. And they were just college kids.”

“They let kids rape each other?”

“Maybe. Probably not, but you get the point.”

“I guess I can believe that. They sure treat us like shit in here. Hey! What you do?” Tyrese asks the new guy.

I’m eying the buzzer again.

“Hit somebody with a stick,” the kid answers.

“That’s it?” I ask. I’m pacing now, moist palms clutching empty pockets.

“It was a big stick. Like five feet long. And real thick.”

"That's called a log," I inform him.

"He was old as fuck, too. Like eighty or ninety."

"So, basically, you beat an old man with a log."

"Yeah, I guess that's it."

"Why?"

"He was yellin' at me."

"Fair enough."

I can't take it anymore. I run to the speaker and hold down the buzzer. "Let me out of here you cock-sucking pigs. I'll kill you all!"

The door swings open almost immediately, and the fat guard sticks me with a tazer. The sizzling blue lightning burns my skin and sends me crashing to the ground, shaking wildly and pissing all over myself.

"Now shut the fuck up," he tells me.

After he's gone and my seizures have subsided, Tyrese helps me to the bench. I jerk and twitch occasionally.

"That's bullshit, man. They got me like that last week 'cause I stayed on the phone too long talkin' to my mama. They just got those fucking shockers, and they real quick to use 'em. Have to break 'em in, is what they told me."

"Help me to the speaker," I tell him.

"Huh?"

"Help me over there. I can't really walk so good right now."

"You droolin', too," the boy who beat the old man says.

"Come on. Help me out, Tyrese. For the chicken."

"Alright. Crazy-ass mother fucker," he mutters, but supports me as I hobble to the intercom.

I mash the button and yell into the little plastic box, "I raped your whore mother last night with a baseball bat, you fat fucking nigger. My granddaddy owned your granddaddy, you stupid fucking monkey. Let me out of here now!" Then to Tyrese, as I can



already hear footsteps pounding down the hallway on the other side of the door, "I'm not really racist. It was just for effect."

"I gotcha, man. We cool," but he steps away from me anyway.

When the door opens, I try to kick the guard in the balls, but slip and fall to the dirty cement floor. The last thing I see is an angry snarl and the viscous downward arch of a nightstick.

\*

"The key to good duck," I say while laying the breast meat into the old cast iron skillet. "Is a twenty four hour brine before cooking." The kitchen fills with hot hisses.

"Where the hell did you get duck, anyway?" Lisa asks. She's dicing onions on the counter. Her eyes are pink and watery.

"Remmie."

"I thought he was in jail."

"Uh-uh. He only spent a night in there."

"Didn't he stab a guard and try to break out?"

"They dropped those charges." I shrug. Mayorial perks, I guess."

We take the food onto the little balcony that juts from Lisa's living room. It's just after noon, and the sky is a nice color of blue - somewhere between blueberry and periwinkle. Everything around us is cold and bright. Lisa props her legs up on my knees and smiles while we eat.

"I'm gonna tell the DA the drugs were mine," I tell her.

"Really? Why?"

"Because I love you."

"Thanks, baby. I love you too." The smile she gives me makes

life better. "Do you think they'll drop my charges?"

"They should."

We finish eating. She stands, takes my empty plate, leans down to kiss me.

"I love you so much."

"I love you, too," I tell her.

Rachel comes out of her bedroom and stands behind me in the doorway, hugging herself and staring at the sky. The bandage is gone now, but her nose is still swollen and bruised.

"Smells good in here," she says.

"You can smell again?"

"Yeah."

I can hear Lisa washing dishes in the sink.

"I left you a plate in the oven," I tell her.

"Thanks. Rich is coming over."

"Okay."

"I really like him."

"Okay. Good."

"I just wanted to thank you for introducing us."

"Okay. No problem."

"I'm gonna go eat now."

"Okay."

When Rich arrives, they disappear into Rachel's room. There's half an hour of loud thuds as the bed frame dry humps the wall, then they come into the living room. The four of us sit in pairs and watch television.

"You wear those gloves when you fuck, too, Richie?" I ask.

Rachel throws one of the sofa pillows at me. "Fuck you, Reilly."

"I take 'em off for special occasions," Rich says with a curling smile. He pulls the black leather gloves tighter.

There's a chemical ink smell in the air, like sniffing a Magic Marker. It gives me a headache.

I pull a vial from my pocket and hold it up so the light makes it glow gold.

"Y'all wanna smoke some honey oil?"

"What's honey oil?" Rachel asks.

"Something good." I tell her. "It's the purest form of THC on the planet. Ninety-nine percent pure."

"It's good," Rich assures her.

"You told me you didn't smoke weed," Rachel says to Rich.

"I don't, but I smoke this."

"Where'd you get it?" Rachel asks me.

"I made it. It takes an ounce of cannabis to extract out a single gram of this oil."

"Damn."

Lisa smiles at me. "And yet you failed your chemistry course."

I shrug and drop a frost covered bud into Lisa's pipe, dip a needle into the vial, then rub it on top of the weed.

"It's the stickiest shit I've ever touched," I tell them as I put the vial away. I hold the pipe to my mouth and hit it with the lighter, then pass it to Lisa. She takes her turn.

"I don't feel anything," she says.

"It'll creep up on you. Give it a minute. When it gets you, you'll be in outerspace."

"Did you hear about Stephen?" Rich asks me while Rachel puffs.

"What about him?"

"He OD'ed on powder."

"Goddam. Where at?"

"Our place. He bought a quarter before lunch, and that night when I came home he was on the ground having a seizure with all this spit and foam coming out of his mouth."

"Poor guy," Lisa says.

"Dumbass," I say.

"So I called an ambulance and dragged him out onto the doorstep. I got all the drugs out of his room and hid them in the neighbor's back yard, just in case. He's in rehab now."

"That sucks."

"Yeah." Rich takes a hit.

"Did they find out about..." I search for the right phrasing. "Old Stephen?"

"No. His ID held up."

"Good."

I lean my head back, enjoying the spacey feeling of the oil.

"Fuck (fuck)" Lisa laughs. "I'm definitely feeling it now (it now)."

"No shit (no shit)," Rachel says.

"I'm floating (floating)," Rich says through a smile. He's rubbing himself all over.

I slap myself on the cheek, trying to sober up. "Coke always catches up with you. It's just a matter of time."

"That's why I worry about you (you)." Lisa snuggles into my chest.

"It'll take more than a little marching powder to get rid of me."

Rich snorts. "That's what they all say (say)."

"This stuff really fucked me up (me up)," Rachel laughs.

"That's what it's for," I tell her. "You know, sometimes life isn't so bad."

Rich grins. "You think this is as good as it gets (it gets)?"

"Yeah," I say and squeeze Lisa. "I think this is as good as it gets."

We sit in silence. Rich and Rachel sprawl out on the floor, holding each other.

"I didn't sleep last night," I tell the room. "I'm gonna go to bed."

I kiss Lisa, then work my way toward the bedroom, fall half-way there, crawl the rest of the way laughing, then pass out on the floor with one arm thrown up on the mattress.

\*

I'm in a hospital - some deal my lawyer worked out with the DA. Self imposed incarceration here in exchange for having the assault charges against the prison guard dropped. The Judge was stone faced when he sentenced me.

I think I expected him to scream, to scold me, to tell me that I'm the scum of the earth - but, no, it was just another day at work for him.

Probation, fines, community service, hospital time. I asked if I could file charges against the police, but my attorney advised me against it. "Leave well enough alone," he said.

The hospital I'm in is controlled through a modern variation of Bentham's Panopticon. Every inmate is hidden from the others. Cameras are mounted high in the corners of each room. The guards have a central monitoring station to watch us. The cameras force each patient to assume the guards are monitoring every individual constantly - except they don't actually have to.

Each patient - those patients capable of such thoughts - must conclude that they are currently being singled out and watched and, subconsciously, we act accordingly.

I was only supposed to be here a week, but on my second night, mad from a handful of pills I bought from Pyro Johnny, I tried to hang myself with my pajama bottoms. I masturbated into

my palm and rubbed the semen all over the lens of the camera in my room.

This gave me time to string myself up, along with a sense of pleasure from the knowledge that someone else would have to clean up my jizz.

I dangled for a few minutes then blacked out. The pants must have ripped, because I woke up with with one light blue pant leg wrapped around my neck and the other dangling from the light fixture above.

Just as I came to, the orderlies burst in and carried me away - confused and thrashing, screaming cries of rape.

Now, I sleep bound with padded leather restraints, and, during the day, I require a constant escort. They inject me with something everyday, some wonderful drug that leaves me constantly confused, and the time here passes in a haze.

The doctor told me my suicide attempt earned me extra time. This sounds like a prize but isn't.

The doctor tells me all sorts of things.

-Do I know that I'm manic?

-Yes.

-Do I know that I'm suicidal?

-Well, yes.

-Do I know that I'm a sociopath?

This is new. The doctor explains to me that this means I'm unable to conform to society's standards, and that I have no care for the rights or feelings of others. This can't be true. When I was five, I habitually raped my stuffed animals and, afterwards, I was always so worried I'd hurt their feelings that I would leave little pieces of chocolate on the bed next to them.

Doctors think they have answers. They like labels. Labels give an illusion of understanding. Things that can be diagnosed and labeled are safe. But the human mind is not safe. The human

condition is not diagnosable.

I'm not allowed visitors, but yesterday I gave a skinny black orderly fifty bucks to let me meet Lisa at the chain link fence surrounding the compound. The orderly, Michael, agreed that nothing cures misery like strong drugs and a good ejaculation. So when I pulled out my penis and stuck it at Lisa through the fence, Michael just watched and rubbed himself instead of stopping Lisa as she began to masturbate me.

After a few minutes of this, Lisa began to cry and had to leave. This made me sad - both because Lisa was so upset and because I hadn't orgasmed.

Mary Anne is in here too. We saw each other in the cafeteria on my second day. She smiled and waved from her wheelchair. We talked, and she told me about how she came to that night in the ambulance. The paramedics stopped the blood, saved her life. The doctors at the hospital, when they learned what she'd done, told her she was crazy and sent her here. She told me that she never mentioned me to anyone and I thanked her. I haven't seen her again since.

Today, Billy, a young guy with one eye, has a seizure as we eat lunch together. While he shakes and flaps on the tile floor, I steal his apple sauce and his little carton of chocolate milk. Craig eyeballs me and the milk. He picks at the white gauze bandage taped over his ear.

"That ain't your milk," he says with a glare.

Shut up, Craig," I hiss.

"No! You stole Billy's milk! You're just like all those other assholes."

"Fuck you, Craig. You attacked a woman for cutting you off with her car! I just took some milk that Billy's not even going to drink. You're the bad guy here, not me. You're the crazy one."

"So are you!"

The orderlies rush over and pin Billy to the floor and jam a rubber guard between his teeth. A stretcher is brought in. It has a bad wheel, and wobbles and clicks as it rolls across the hard floor. Billy is lifted onto the stretcher when he finally stops seizing. They wheel him out.

Thump, thump, click clack, thump thump, click clack.

"I hate you," I mouth at Craig as the orderlies leave.

"I'm gonna kill you," he yells and grabs a plastic butter knife then jumps over the table towards me.

A big vein in Craig's forehead pulses a bloody shade of purple. He stands near six foot-four, outweighs me by at least sixty pounds. An American flag bandanna is tied around his head and he's wearing a t-shirt with a great white shark baring its teeth amid a cloud of blood. His left ear is bandaged with white gauze and tape. I don't know why.

I go into a Sambo stance - a lethal Russian martial art that, several years ago, I watched a forty-minute television documentary on.

"I'm gonna fuck you up like I did those Japs in Korea," Craig tells me.

"You're only thirty-five, you crazy fuck!" I scream.

"I'm special forces, Mongoose Squad!" He grunts and waves his arms in a series of punches and karate chops.

"You're a fucking idiot."

Craig screeches and charges, drives the knife into my gut before I can react. There's painful pressure, but the plastic blade bends and snaps before any real damage is done. I try to sweep kick his legs out from under him, but he's like a tree trunk, and my foot just bounces off.

Craig grabs my hair and knees my face - once, twice, three times. Something breaks. I feel blood in my throat.



"uck," I moan and cup my nose.

I punch him in his ear.

"Bitch!" he yells, wincing and grabbing at the bandage.

An orderly runs up and clubs Craig in the small of his back.

Craig screams and collapses to the floor. I kick him in the nose before I'm tackled by another orderly. Three orderlies pin Craig down as he bucks and struggles. Another leads me out of the cafeteria.

"I'm gonna fucking kill you, Reilly!" Craig screams, blood and spit flying from his mouth. "You're dead, you fucking cunt nigger!"

"Can you believe that guy?" I ask the orderly. Craig's screams and curses fade behind us. "There's no place for racism like that in a fine facility like this."

The orderly just shakes his head.

"You've certainly managed to distinguish yourself here," The Doctor says as he lights a cigarette. He has a long, looping gray mustache.

"Okay."

I hum part of a Ween song - Japanese Cowboy - touch the splint in my nose and wince.

"In an institution filled with psychopaths, arsonists, and schizophrenics, you've continually managed to stand out."

"I once saw a man drink his own urine."

"What?"

"Then he masturbated a dog."

"So?"

"Perspective."

"Perspective?" The Doctor asks.

"That's it."

"What about perspective?"

"Just perspective."

The Doctor sighs. "Alright. Well, you're supposed to be re-

leased in a couple days. I'm not going to stop it. You'll be free to go."

"Okay."

"You really deserve to spend the rest of your life locked away in a box, but you're a pain in the ass and apparently the hospital administrator received a call from your mother as well. She's made some kind of donation, so he's supporting my decision." He laughs and takes a drag from his cigarette. "I took this job with a pledge to help everyone I could. You've managed to make me break that pledge for the first time in my career."

"Really?" I ask.

"There's something about you that just..." He gives an angry groan and pumps his hand into a fist.

"Okay," I say.

"Aren't you going to thank me?"

"For what?"

"For not keeping you here."

"You know that smell that floats up from the water when you fart in the bath? That old, wet corpse smell?" I ask.

He frowns. "I suppose."

"That's what this office smells like. I think it's coming from you."

He forces a tight-lipped smile. "Maybe we'll have a chance to try a little electroshock therapy before you leave us."

"Maybe."

The Doctor stubs his cigarette, walks over, and shakes my hand.

"I hope I never see you again," he tells me. "Next time you try to kill yourself, get it fucking right."

I'm warm and excited from the speed, but already beginning to feel nervous in expectation of the looming come down. Paul's stretched out on the floor, looking up at the TV and playing a video game. There's a needle hanging from Lee's arm, and a thin trail of blood is slicing down his skin.

The music - The String Cheese Incident - is dim, distant in the background of life.

I concentrate on my breathing, try to find peace and relaxation, but it's long gone at this point. A lizard runs across the wall.

Lisa comes in, her face dirty with tears. Short, hard cries erupt from her chest and stick in her throat, coming out as hard little gasps.

She walks past us without speaking and slams my bedroom door behind her. We sit, momentarily puzzled, in her wake. The video game beeps rhythmically from the television. Lee stirs but doesn't wake.

I go into the dark bedroom and slide into bed next to her.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She's abrupt, sniffing.

"Come on...what's wrong?"

"Just hold me for a minute. Don't talk."

There's a long silence as we lie with my arms around her. She jerks occasionally, her whole body racked by shudders.

"I went to a party with an old friend," she says finally. "A guy I knew in high school."

I kiss the soft skin behind her ear.

"We were on the couch talking and drinking beer when he started grabbing me," she whispers.

Crazy, mad blood swells my face.

"There were people all around, and I kept pushing him off, but

he wouldn't stop. He wouldn't stop! And no one helped me. He raped me. He fucking raped me right there, surrounded by all these strange people and no one did anything."

Unbelievable fury. Rage. It makes me dizzy and hot. Hate grows inside me, moving around under my skin like spiders.

Something grows in my chest, something I've never felt before, and it moves up into my head and out my eyes - two sets of hungry phantom fangs filling my vision, lashing and snapping, trying to pull free of my body so it can eat.

"What's his name?" I ask quietly.

"It doesn't matter," she says.

"Tell me who he is."

"You don't know him."

"So tell me then."

"No."

"Why not?"

She starts to cry again. "His name's Brian. Okay?"

"Where's the party at?"

"No!"

"No, what?"

"I'm not going to tell you. You're going to go over there and try to hurt him. All his friend's are there. They'll kill you."

"Just tell me."

"You'll get hurt."

"Tell me."

She does.

The tires are loud against the asphalt when we whip into the driveway.

The house is lit up. A crowd is standing around the front lawn. I get out and open the trunk, pull a 6-iron from my golf bag.

"No way," Lee says beside me. "If you're gonna use a club, use

the one. You hit that six too sweet to ruin it.”

I ignore him and scream, “Brian!”

A head turns in the crowd. I point the club at him.

“Brian?” I call. “You’re Brian?”

“Who the fuck are you?”

He’s bigger than me, wearing baggy jeans and a Dave Matthews Band t-shirt. He’s swaying on his feet, holding a cozied bottle of beer. He let’s out a loud belch.

I run up on him. The grooved steel clubface catches him on the side of his knee with a thud. He falls, grabbing his leg and, after a drunken delay, screams. Someone shouts for me to stop and begins to come at me. Paul’s fist catches him in the jaw.

Lee pulls out a pistol and waves it at the crowd. “Everybody stay still. It’ll be over quick enough.”

I’m wailing on him now, Brian, and the skin of his forearms splits open as he tries to defend himself. Rattling vibrations come up the club - feels like when I come short of a golf ball and catch the dirt.

Dull pain in my arms and shoulders. I can see the fear and confusion on his face. The sounds of the beating have become wet and muted. His screams are still loud.

When I was a child, my self loathing would sometimes swell and I would beat anyone who annoyed or angered me. Even as my fists pounded on them, through the hate and adrenaline, I felt their fear, and a sickening guilt would keep me awake for nights after.

Now, whether from the drugs or the madness that’s festered and developed since childhood, this feeling is absent.

Black blood flies all over me. It feels hot, and I worry it will burn my skin. Before Brian’s eyes close and consciousness is lost, I can read acceptance on his face as he comes to the understanding that this is the end for him.

Inside, I am an emotionless void - no feelings at all. Even the

anger is gone.

Reality is an old joke by the time his skull dents and breaks open in a small jagged hole. Under the half-moon glowing down on us, I see his veiny brain veiled in a thin mucus sack. There's the sound of air escaping his cranium. Everyone is screaming, crying, vomiting - different sounds that hurt my ears.

I scream, "Shut up! Shut the fuck up!" while holding the bent club and pointing it at the crowd.

My arms are tired. Lee is still holding the gun, but it's lowered now as his face stares at the pile of flesh before me.

I think I like the way his body looks there, mangled in the grass.

"I think you killed him," Lee says on the drive home.

"Good." My mouth taste musky and sour. I need a Xanax.

"I probably wouldn't have come if I knew you were going to fucking kill somebody," Paul says.

"How's it feel?" Lee asks. "Isn't that the big question? How it feels to take a life?"

"Someone told me once that killing in revenge doesn't help - doesn't make it any better," I tell them.

"So?" Paul asks.

"He was wrong."

There's a span of silence - no music. The road ahead is dark, cut open by the bright blue halogen head lights.

Lee asks, "What if they got your license plate number?"

"I smeared it with mud before we left our place," Paul says. "Can't make out the numbers at all."

"Should we be worried?" Lee asks.

"Who gives a fuck?" I say.

I hope my arms won't be sore in the morning.

Curtis said the revenge didn't help, didn't take away the hurt, and he was wrong, for the most part. I feel better now, feel a primal satisfaction, feel that I've defended my woman and done the right thing. But there is fear, hatred - hatred of myself.

I've crossed the line now, the analogous line in the sand. I've committed the worst act a human being is capable of. I fear myself. I fear what I could be capable of. How far will this dementia take me? How far will I go? How many people will I hurt?

I must end this. I must stop myself.

I need to kill myself.

But not yet.

\*

I love the sweet candy that is my ever nearing death. Without it there is no excitement, no thrill. Only the knowledge of this inevitable fate makes life interesting. It comes quick or it comes slow, but we all know that it's coming. We can pretend we're invulnerable, pretend we'll never die - but one day, one day like any other, something will happen and death will be there, standing just over our shoulder.

I like to imagine he smiles as he takes us away.

I'm naked, sitting on the edge of the bed. The air is cold. Little bumps of flesh rise from my skin. Tonight is the last night in the apartment. The place is empty, save the bed and a few brown boxes on the floor.

There's no clock, but it must be late, everything's quiet outside - that short period of time after the night creatures have retired yet the birds are still asleep.

I can feel Lisa behind me, sense her breath on my back. The blankets are pulled down around her shins. The gentle curves of her breasts are bared to me. Dark, hypnotic nipples accent her glowing flesh. My insides jump around as I watch her sleep.

Lee bursts through the bedroom door, staggers and catches himself on the wall. His face is confused when he sees me in the near dark, then he turns to look out the window.

"Sorry. I didn't know you were naked."

"That's okay," I say quietly and throw the sheet over Lisa. I get up and pull on a pair of boxers. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm all geeked up on ice and your door was open so I came in."

"Okay." I point at Lisa and whisper, "Let's go downstairs."

Downstairs, after I've turned on a Woody Guthrie album, we sit on the floor and lean our backs against the wall.

"Man, I really need a fix," Lee says.

"I don't think I have anything here. I'm all moved out except some shit up stairs and that CD player," I tell him.

"Nothing? No pills or nothing?" He's jittery.

"Maybe a couple Oxycontin."

"Get 'em. Get 'em, please. What milligram are they?"

"I think eighty."

"I'll give you two hundred bucks for the pair," he says.

"Alright, they're upstairs. I'll meet you at your place."

Back upstairs, while rifling through one of the boxes, Lisa calls to me.

"What are you doing?" Her voice is clouded with sleep.

"Just getting some pills for Lee."

"It's too late."

"He's wide open on speed."

"Oh. Well, hurry back," she says.

"Okay, baby."



Lee's hands shake as he holds the flame under the soot-stained spoon. When the ground up pills have turned to a bubbling liquid, he adds a cotton ball, then drops in the needle and uses his teeth to pull back the plunger and fill the barrel.

The apartment is full of cigarette smoke that clings to everything - the floor, the walls, the air. There's nothing in the room but two lawn chairs, a balled up blanket, and Lee's guitar.

"What happened to all your stuff?" I ask.

"Pawned it."

I grunt. "Why not the guitar?"

"That's my baby. I'll never let her go."

"Hey guys," Lisa walks through the open doorway in her robe, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

"I thought you went back to sleep," I say.

"Couldn't. You woke me up."

I kiss her cheek. "Sorry."

Lee ties off with a braided leather belt, slaps the blue vein in his arm a couple times, then pops the needle in.

"Fuck," he moans. His face crumples in pain. "It burns--" His eyes close and his face smooths out. He leans back in the lawn chair.

"Fucking junkie," Lisa says. She goes into the kitchen and comes back with a dirty glass of lemonade, then sits next to me on the floor.

"Love you," I tell her.

"Mmm." She smiles. "I like when you tell me that. It makes me feel special."

"You are special." I lean over and kiss her. You're the most special thing in the world to me. Except the dogs, or course."

She giggles. "Of course. The babies get priority."

We sit for a moment, holding each other, then I say, "Have you

seen those commercials for penis enhancement drugs?"

She pats my leg. "You're fine, baby."

"Thanks, but it's still interesting."

"No, it's not. You're just right."

"You have to say that, though."

"That doesn't mean it's not true."

"I just want to have a really big dick, you know? Something that would make people gasp when I pull it out. They say the pills are scientifically tested."

"That could mean anything. I read somewhere that the only way to get a bigger penis is to have surgery."

"Oh. Damn."

"I'm the only girl you have to worry about, and I like you just the way you are. I don't want a penis that scares me when you pull it out."

I kiss her forehead.

"Ice and Oxycontin," I say, glancing at Lee's slumped figure. "That's a white trash speed ball."

"Hey, Lee," Lisa calls. She finds a tennis ball on the floor and throws it at him.

"Don't ruin it for him."

"Fuck him. Lee!"

"He's not gonna wake up. He probably hasn't been to sleep in a couple days."

Lisa goes over to him and gently pulls the needle from his arm, then loosens the belt.

"Reilly," she calls.

"Yeah?"

"I don't think he's breathing."

"What?"

I jump up.

She puts her fingers to the big artery in his neck, then turns a

horrified face to me.

“His heart’s stopped.”

“Fuck.”

I grab Lee by the shoulders and pull him to the floor.

“Give him CPR!” I scream.

Lisa pinches his nose and blows into his mouth, pumps her palms on his chest. Lee’s ribs bend under her hands. She works for a few minutes, then finally falls back and begins to cry.

“He’s dead,” she says. “I think he’s dead.”

“Shit.”

I haul the body back into the chair, tighten the belt back around his arm, then trace the trail of blood back to the puncture mark and stab in the hypodermic.

“Go back next door,” I tell Lisa.

“What are you doing?”

“Cleaning up. Go back next door.”

I find a hand towel by the kitchen sink and begin to wipe off everything we’ve touched - the plastic jug of lemonade, Lisa’s glass, the syringe, and the belt.

Satisfied, I find Lee’s wallet on the kitchen counter and look inside. Empty. I place the guitar across his lap, wipe it clean, and pat his shoulder.

“Sorry, buddy.”

With a last glance at the corpse - already turning waxy and pale - I close the apartment door and wipe off the handle.

“What’s going to happen?” Lisa asks me when we’re both back in my apartment.

“Somebody will find him. But we were never there.”

“Does he have a roommate?”

“No.”

“You’re just gonna leave him there to rot?” she asks.

“Yes.”

Lisa splashes water on her face in the kitchen. The soft skin under her eyes is red and irritated. She gives me a weak smile.

"That was scary."

"Everything's okay," I tell her. "I move out of here in the morning and we'll never have to worry about it again."

We sit on the floor. I hold her. She lays her head on my thigh and I run the tips of my fingers over her silver hair.

"Jesus. Are we bad people, Reilly?" she asks.

"The worst."

\*

We're under the blankets, hiding from the cold air, playing with each other and kissing. Our breath is warm. It hovers like a cloud of condensation inside the fabric bubble. I run my hand down the dip of Lisa's spine.

"I dream about you," I whisper. "You're so beautiful."

I feel her smile in the dark. "You're too good to me."

"Nothing's too good for you."

"I'm sorry I left," she says.

"Let's not talk about it. I'm too happy right now. Let me have this."

"I want to talk about it. Now."

"No."

"I need to."

"It was my fault," I tell her quietly. "I lost it. I'm sorry."

"No, it wasn't," she says. "Not all your fault."

"Doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does."

"No, it doesn't."

The soft smell of her body surrounds me.

"I had an abortion."

The world goes black. I flush fire.

"What?"

She's crying now. "An abortion. I had a goddam abortion."

I throw back the covers. The cold swoops in.

"You were pregnant?"

"Yes."

"With our baby?"

"Yes."

"And you killed it?" I yell.

"Fuck you! I had an abortion. I didn't kill anything."

"There was a baby in you! Now it's dead!"

"It wasn't a baby. It was just...goo."

"Whatever." I cover my eyes. "Fuck."

I get up and pace short, angry steps, fight to hold back the tears burning behind my eyes.

"I'm sorry," she weeps.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm sorry."

"Why didn't you fucking tell me?" I scream.

"I'm sorry!"

"Is that why you left?" I ask. "To get an abortion?"

"No. I had the abortion before I left. About a month before."

"Jesus! Then why did you leave? Why didn't you say something?"

Blue comes to the doorway and whines.

"I - I just couldn't look at you anymore. It hurt too much. It made me think of what had happened. I - I needed a break."

"You didn't tell me it was a fucking break! You said it was over!"

"I didn't know if I'd come back. It was too much to deal with

then, too much to think about. Then I saw you at that concert, and...you know."

"You murdered our child! You called off the wedding and ruined my fucking life!"

"We weren't ready to have a baby! What was I supposed to do?"

"Fuck! How about talking to me about it? You think about that? It would have been nice to have had a voice in the damn thing! It's a decision we should have made together!"

I get out of bed and pull on my suede jacket, rub Blue's head and tell her she's a good dog, that everything's okay.

"You always said you were pro-choice," she says

"Well, I guess that changes when it's my fucking baby. Fuck! I'm going for a walk."

I leave her in the house. It's freezing outside and I'm barefoot - wearing just the jacket and a pair of underwear. The skin on my legs turns blue. I storm through the dark woods. Pine cones and needles stab at my feet.

Finally, I go to my car, get in and blast the heater. The dashboard glows red. I start to drive up the driveway, trying to understand, trying to know what to do.

They lied to me about life, all of them. There's no one looking out for me, no higher power. There's no fairness or justice or happiness. There's no peace, no love, no beauty.

There is no happy ending.

You can't expect happiness. It comes, briefly, before disappearing back into its dark sea of misery. It lurks, tempts you. It waits until you risk yourself in a blind dive to find it. It pokes its head like an eel from a hole, urging you to keep on as your lungs fill with pain. It laughs while you search, grope, and flail.

It smiles while you drown.

\*

The community service that my probation requires consists of long sweltering days spent on uncomfortable chairs in a bare, cement gray room hidden in the courthouse basement. The hours pass slowly on the little round time clock the county workers use to punch in for their shifts.

The janitors are in charge, and at times throughout the day we follow them around, cleaning bathrooms, emptying trash - doing all their work for them as they stand and watch, idly criticizing.

The rest of the time we sit in the basement room and listen to the janitors talk.

Randolph, a thin over dressed man with a feminine Southern voice - a voice that would have made Capote cringe - is the most outspoken. He tells us that he was fired from his job at a bra factory just months shy of collecting retirement.

Randolph is sure life holds some greater destiny for him beyond this menial janitorial labor. He reminds me of this constantly throughout the day as he whines and bitches. He's been married four times and, by his standards, all women are whores.

"One time we had to make a bra for a woman with three titties," he tells me while he smokes a cigarette in the parking lot.

"Each one was normal and good sized, but I swear to God - she had three damn titties. Now, that's the kind of woman I need!"

Randolph eats painkillers constantly, claiming a bad back, and, while running into walls and forgetting what he's doing, insists the drugs have no affect on him.

"That's one queer motherfucker," a fat young back boy tells me while we pretend to clean a bathroom. "Ain't no way Randolph has

a wife."

"Take it, bitch!" I mime Randolph's voice. "Take it right up your fucking whore asshole!"

The fat guy - he tells me his name is Willy - laughs and sprays a white cloud of disinfectant into the air.

"What are you here for?" Willy asks me.

"Possession."

"Of weed?"

"Yup."

"That sucks," he says. "I'm a terrorist."

"What's that?"

"A terrorist. I'm on felony probation for making terroristic threats."

"That's pretty fucked up, man. I didn't even know there were black terrorists. I thought they were all just A-rabs."

"You never heard of the Black Panthers?"

"Oh yeah. Well, besides them."

"I don't really want to hurt anybody. I just got real fucked up on liquor one night and sent a girl a message saying I was gonna do some crazy shit the next day at school. I told her she better not show up."

"What school?"

"High school."

"You're still in high school?"

"Yeah."

"Wow. A black, high school terrorist. I guess I'm lucky to meet you. You ever get around to blowing up that school?"

"Nah, man. I was just drunk and pissed off. Talkin' out my ass. You know."

"Tuck in those damn shirt-tails!" Randolph yells, appearing in the doorway.

"My shirt is tucked in," I say, looking down at myself.



"Tuck it in tighter. You - black boy. Your damn shirt's hanging to your goddam knees. Tuck it in!"

"What did you call me, you fucking faggot?" Willy yells. "You say anymore of that racist shit and I'll beat the gay out of you."

I throw back my head and cackle madly.

"What? " Randolph's red. "What did you call me, you little bastard? You're out of here! You just lost credit for the whole day, you son of a bitch. And I'm going to tell your probation officer all about this. I'm going to tell him you were doing drugs. They'll send you right back to jail, you little nigger. What do you think about that? Huh? Huh?"

Willy hurls the can of disinfectant, but Randolph's little thin legs move fast and he dodges it. The can hits the wall with a clang and clatters to the floor.

Willy walks out of the bathroom, shoves Randolph as he passes, and whispers something I can't hear. I finally get control of my laughter and the room is quiet.

Randolph stares at me.

"I think it's cool to be gay," I tell him. "Who cares if you can't get married? It's just a piece of paper, right?"

"I'm not gay, damnit!" he whines. "I hate faggots. They shouldn't be allowed to marry. It's a sin and God hates it as much as he hates them."

"So, homosexuality has nothing to do with four wives leaving you?"

His eyes narrow. "No! They were all cheating whores so I left them."

"Okay."

"Now tuck that shirt-tail in."

"It's already tucked in."

"Well, tuck it in tighter."

"Alright, Randolph."

Back in the basement, we all laugh as I tell the story of Willy and Randolph's squabble. The others clap and roar as I imitate the janitor's feminine voice.

"Your shirt's stained," the girl sitting next to me says when I've finished talking.

She's tall and muscular like a man, but with a pretty face and marbled green eyes.

"What?" I ask, staring at the tits she's trying to hide under a baggy t-shirt.

"There's a stain on your shirt," she says, and rubs her finger around a spot on my chest.

She leaves it there for a moment while I study her hand. It's petite and smooth, emphasizing the size of her forearms.

"Egg. It's egg yolk." I say. "I don't notice things like that normally."

"Doesn't look like you brushed your hair, either."

"I forget that a lot too. Almost always."

"I like it. It's curly. Like an angel. Can I touch it?"

"Okay."

She runs her fingers through my hair. They catch on a knotted tangle and I wince.

"It's so fine and smooth," she says.

"Yeah, I wash it a lot. Too much."

"There's nothing wrong with that."

"Apparently, there is. They say it's obsessive compulsive. It's kinda an inconvenience. I'm on medication to stop it. I guess it doesn't work, though."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

I can hear Randolph in the stairwell, screaming into his phone, "You do what I say, bitch, or when I get home I'll punch you square

in the nose!"

"Jesus," the girl mutters.

"I think he has a lot of pent up frustration," I tell her. "Sexual."

"I think he's funny."

"I don't. He's an asshole."

"That's mean," she giggles.

"You wanna go do some powder?"

"No. You want to fuck?"

"Well, yeah. But I shouldn't."

"Girlfriend?"

"Something."

"Okay. Well, let me know if you change your mind."

"I will."

Randolph waves at me and Jamal, a tall emaciated man about my age with tight cornrows.

"See ya later," I tell the girl.

Randolph leads us outside. He hands me a weed eater.

"Trim all these weeds," he says and gestures at the tall grass surrounding the parking lot.

I stare at him.

Jamal says, "Okay."

Once Randolph's gone I throw the weed eater down and lie on a short brick wall that's concealed behind a dumpster. Jamal sits near my feet and smokes a Black and Mild.

"This shit drags on forever," I say.

"What shit?"

"This community service shit. I gotta do this for thirty days."

"Oh. Yeah, it does. I got twenty days."

"It's fuckin' cold out here."

"Yeah, it is."

"You got any weed?"

"Just this blunt," he says and fishes it from a deep pocket.

Jamal sets down his cheap cigar on the bricks and lights the blunt. It's thick and crooked and burns slowly. I have to pull hard to get a hit through it.

"Goddam. Look at that."

I look up and see the girl from earlier lugging a knotted black garbage bag towards the dumpster we're hiding behind.

Jamal grunts. "She's like a damn amazon. Warrior princess and shit."

"She's cute."

"Cute? Shit man, I'd fuck the brakes off that bitch."

"Hey guys," she calls to us after tossing the trash. "Can I hit that?"

"Hell yeah, girl," Jamal tells her and hands her the blunt.

"What's your name, girl?"

"Krista."

The blunt goes around two more times before it's too small to hold. James looks at Krista, then at me, and winks.

"I gotta go take a shit," he informs us and walks away.

Krista sighs. "I got to work tonight and I don't want to."

"What do you do?"

"Prostitute."

"Oh yeah? I hear there's good money in that."

"I guess, but I hate it."

"Everybody hates their job."

"I guess."

We lay in the weeds and let the winter sun warm our skin.

"So, when you wanted to fuck earlier, were you gonna charge me?" I ask.

"Nah. I just thought you were cute."

I smile.

"And you're the only white guy here," she adds.

“Oh. You don’t fuck black guys?”

“Not for free.”

“That’s alright, I guess. It would be cool to be able to tell my friends I fucked a hooker and didn’t have to pay. Isn’t that a joke or something? I was so good the hooker paid me.”

“Something like that,” she laughs. “But I wasn’t going to pay you.”

“Not even a dollar? Just so I could say you did? What if I’m really good?”

“How about I buy you lunch?”

“That’s tempting. Gotta figure I won’t have this opportunity very often, right?”

“Probably not.”

“Okay. I’m in. Let’s do it.”

We find an empty store room and she sucks my dick while I bury my nose in a bag of cocaine.

“Alright, your turn,” I say when I’m high and sweaty.

She strips and lies on the desk. I lap at her bald pussy, then take some of the powder from the baggie, rub it all over her clit and lash it with my tongue.

“Oh shit!” she screams.

After she cums, I grab her by the hair and kiss her, jam my tongue into her mouth and make her taste her juices.

“You got a condom?” she pants.

“No.” I hold a bump of the powder under her nose.

She sniffs it up and says, “Fuck it. I’m clean, are you?”

“Sure.”

I bend her over and hammer away while jamming my thumb up her little wrinkled asshole. At first it’s good, but all the blood in my body rushes to my head and chest, and my erection falters.

Frustrated, I give up, slap her ass, and decide to tell her I have AIDs.

“You motherfucker! I’ll kill you!” and she’s on top of me, pinning me down and straddling me, slicing and scratching my face with her nails, punching and swinging with her fists.

As I taste the hot, slick blood in my mouth, I feel my cock start to grow beneath the warmth of her crotch.

“Hit me again,” I mumble through a split lip.

Turned on by the violence, I throw her off me, pin her to the floor and jab my dick back into her. She’s strong, but I’m heavy and I pin her down with my belly. Only my hips move as the head of my cock grinds against the walls of her vagina.

“You dirty fucking whore,” I spit at her as she fights and cries. “You stupid fucking whore!”

I shoot my load into her and stand up, wipe away some loose paper clips that have stuck to my ass and pull up my pants.

She crawls into the corner and weeps, her arms crossed across her chest to hide her breasts.

“That was great,” I tell her. “This will be a great story to tell all my friends.”

“Fuck you.”

“Yeah, alright.”

“Do you really have AIDs?”

“Guess you’ll find out.”

“I hate you. I’ll fucking kill you if I see you again.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll let you owe me for that lunch.”

I leave the room and decide to skip the rest of the community service for today.

I drive home, crawl into the darkness under my bed, and weep.

I wake up under my bed, and, for a long time - days, maybe weeks - I don’t move except to blink and clear the scratchy sleep from under my eyelids.

There’s no light or sound, so I assume it’s night. Finally, I

shimmy from beneath the mattress, stretch my back, and stand.

When I flick on the light, I find myself alone in the bedroom.

Red, blue, and green balloons, stretched out of shape from nitrous, decorate the beige carpet with grotesque blobs of color.

There's plastic baggies and fast food wrappers. The place is a dump. I notice the bed is slightly askew and push the frame two inches toward the wall with my thighs.

My hair feels dirty and tangled. The urge to start grabbing fistfuls, viscously ripping them out, becomes so overwhelming that I go into the bathroom.

Some kind of fungus or mold is growing from dried vomit around the base of the toilet. I stare at myself in the mirror. Blue eyes, deep in the sockets, stare back. My eyes are motionless, dead - no hint of life anywhere in them.

Someone told me once that a person's memories are stored in their hair. This thought plays mean games with my mind as I watch my reflection. I move away from the mirror, turn on the shower, and stick my head under the cold stream of water. My skin tightens, my hair grows wet and dark. Chills cut through my body, racing up and down in long shudders that prickle my skin.

Chin length hair clings to my face. Water drips and splashes against my chest. I grab a pair of blue-handled scissors and attack my hair, cutting it away in dark clumps that fall and bounce off my shoulders and into the puddles gathering on the floor around me.

I do the same to my beard. Small wispy tufts cling to my chest. There skin there becomes red and itchy.

The hair's short now, hacked down to quarter inch spikes. The electric razor is removed from its charger, combed along my scalp and face. The spinning blades twirl back and forth as they work at removing what remains. The electric buzz of the chattering metal is a fitting soundtrack for the deed.

My face and head burn. My scalp is pale, laced with tangled

purple veins. I rub my hand across the remaining stubble. It bristles and grinds under my palm.

No release comes. No relief. The memories remain. I start to cry small, hot tears that sting the soft skin of my cheeks.

I know the answer. The answer is easy. What is the question? Is there a question?

I want to die. Why am I waiting? Why am I putting off the inevitable conclusion? I don't know. I don't know anything anymore.

\*

I'm vomiting again, a constant projectile stream that shoots up my throat and burns the inside of my nose.

Inspecting the toilet, I see no blood. Maybe the hole in my stomach has healed itself, but I don't think that's possible. Little pieces of sunflower seed shells float in the bowl. I hack once, twice, spit out black-laced mucus that comes from deep in my lungs.

I clean the puke from my chin and leave.

Later, I'm playing the piano and doing cocaine and heroin off a paperback copy of *A Farewell to Arms*. My long, pale fingers attack the beige keys with drug-fueled speed. I miss notes often and produce jarring, off tone yelps.

My vision is tinted with a milky haze. I smoke a joint between songs to even out the powder, but it just makes me jittery.

Three more lines of coke and my hands are shaking so much I can no longer play.

I take the book outside and try to read on the raised wood deck. Half a page and I'm done, too nervous to stay still. There are dark, khaki stains in the pits of my old white shirt. It sticks to the



wet skin of my back and breasts.

My body is hot and numb. My coarse pubes itch with infuriating intensity, so I scratch myself until burning pain surpasses the itching.

The dogs chase something into the woods, barking and howling in an excited, animal fervor. Hoarse, infuriated yelps tell me Fred is chasing something.

I lift weights in the garage for an hour, then, nervous my heart will explode, lay twitching on the plush carpet. Suicide is a fine thing, but an accidental overdose is a weak, embarrassing way to die. The dogs, back now, mill excitedly mill around me, licking my face and sniffing at my sweat glazed skin.

It starts to rain. The sound of the water pattering on the roof is sickly soothing, like sweet, orange flavored cough syrup. I smoke more weed and decide to never eat again.

Satisfied with this decision I blindly fire one of my rifles, a .308, through the open sliding glass door into the dark wet night - because Happiness is a warm gun and I enjoy the loud, brutal kick of the maple stock against my shoulder.

The dogs are sleeping. Fred snores. His round belly rises and falls. I start to eat, to force two slices of pizza down my tight, numb throat, then remember my earlier decree and stop. Instead drink a glass of water from the forty-ounce mug someone gave me as a Hanukkah gift - although I'm not now, nor have I ever been, Jewish.

The coke is long gone and I'm suicidal. Should I cut my wrist? No, I've ruled that out before. Same for the throat. Overdose? I've tried. Doesn't work, not for me. Poison seems painful.

Maybe a swan dive from a tall building - although the fall would be long and allow for the possibility of a horrifying, mid-air second of doubt.

I guess that leaves one logical answer, quick and painless - as long as I don't miss.

A friend from high school calls and invites me to his birthday party in Athens. For some reason, I agree to go. I hang up and begin a series of attempts to walk through the wall. I'm sure that if I concentrate just right, my molecules will loose form, and I'll move through the plaster unhindered.

Tomorrow, I'll drive into town and, bare-chested, chant obscenities while marching circles around the old antebellum courthouse, then come home, get in my car, and drive to Athens.

These are the days of infinite misery and long, lonesome knives.

\*

The whores arrive just before midnight. The Asian - looks Thai - strips immediately. Her face is squished flat, but her legs are toned and her tits are big and fake.

I'm on the couch, a joint hanging from my lips and a bottle of whiskey squeezed between my legs. The Asian approaches and sits next to me, then begins rubbing my thigh.

"Hello," I say.

"You like my tits?" she asks.

"Sure. They're...big."

She lays on her back. I can see the small incision marks under her breasts. The bag of cocaine in my pocket comes out and I break out two big rails - one on each of her breasts - then put them up my nose. I lick off the residue. Her skin is salty and warm.

"Give me some," she says.

I use the long nail on my pinkie to scoop out a bump and hold

it under her nose. When it's gone she sniffs and smiles.

"You like my tits?"

"You already asked me that."

The other girl, a blond, has tossed a duffel bag onto the table. She's grinding her ass into Wheeler's crotch, wearing a plaid skirt, thigh-high white stockings, and a thin white collared shirt tied in a loose knot under her breasts.

Wheeler is sitting in a chair, holding her hips and laughing while she dances. The others - Jay, Dylan, Rob, and some guys I don't know - are gathered around, drinking beers and cheering at the blond.

"Is that the Tyler Wheeler?" the Asian asks me.

"I don't know."

I slap her tittie and watch the skin move and ripple around the silicone pouch buried inside her.

"What do you mean?" she says. "Is he or isn't he?"

"Well, his name is Tyler Wheeler."

"Is he the football player?"

"He plays football."

"He's going to the NFL next year, isn't he?" she asks.

"That's the word."

I find half a straw, stick it into the bag of coke, and snort as much as I can.

"How do you know him?" she asks.

"We grew up together. I grew up with all these guys." I point at Jay, Rob, and Dylan.

"Wow. That must be awesome."

"Maybe. We don't see each other much anymore. I just came up for Wheeler's birthday. I'm going to kill myself, and I thought I'd come up here and see these guys one last time."

I'm sweating hard now. I peel off my shirt.

"You want a blow job?" she asks.

"Okay."

She knows what she's doing. I get hard quick.

Three football players show up, big black guys. I snort more cocaine. The blond's shirt is off now. So is her thong. Blunts are lit and passed. I do more cocaine. Someone hands me a blunt. I hit it and lean my head back. The whore's still working on my cock.

My blood is pumping fast now. I feel it moving away from my dick. My erection withers and dies.

"What's wrong?" the Asian asks.

"Nothing. Keep sucking."

She does.

"I had a dream last night," I tell her. "There was a lake with a little island in the middle and a midget standing on the island, waving at me. I tried to swim to him, but the water held me back." Her head is bobbing up and down. Her dark hair is pulled tight to her head. "What do you think of that?" I ask. "Is that one of those Freudian things?"

She makes a wet, muffled noise around my dick.

"Yeah, I don't think so either," I say quietly. "I'd like to kill you. I'd like to cut you up and watch you bleed. I hate you."

Three more big snorts from the baggie of powder and I'm done with the whore. I pull her head off my cock and tell her to go away. She shrugs and heads over to the football players.

I tuck my dick back into my pants then get up and take two Viagra from the bowl of pills on the kitchen table. The blond has taken Wheeler into the bedroom. The Asian is on her knees, four guys have gathered around her, wagging their cocks in her face. She jacks off two while blowing another, then rotates to the next guy.

I pour the rest of the cocaine onto the table, break it into three huge lines, and put them up my nose - one after the other after the

other in quick succession.

My heart is near exploding now. I collapse on the couch. Occasional flashes blind the room. Someone is taking pictures of the debauchery.

Two more blond girls wander in. They look with disgust at the gang fuck in the center of the room then sit next to me on the couch.

"Hi," one says.

"Hello." I wipe the sweat from my face with a towel.

"Where's Wheeler?" she asks.

"Bedroom."

"Oh." She holds out her hand. "I'm Kandi. This is Amber. We live next door."

I shake her hand. "That's nice."

"Wheeler told you about us?" Amber asks.

"No."

They giggle.

"What an asshole." Amber leans close to me, walks her fingers across my belly while staring into my eyes. "We're dancers," she whispers.

"And you live next door?" I ask. "From Wheeler?"

"Yeah. We're over here all the time."

"Lucky bastard," I mutter.

"What?" Kandi asks.

"Nothing."

I dig a pipe from my pocket, pack it, then take a hit, blow out a lung-shaped cloud of smoke, and hand it to the Kandi.

"Thanks." She takes a hit. "You want a lap dance?"

"No thanks. Maybe later."

Wheeler comes out of the bedroom. He sees the Asian getting fucked by the three black guys and throws back his head and howls, beating his chest.

"What a fucking birthday!" he yells.

One of the guys explodes all over the Asian's face. I throw her the towel I've been using to wipe away my sweat.

"You meet the girls?" Wheeler asks me, gesturing to Kandi and Amber. He sits on the floor in front of me, takes the pipe and hits it..

"Yep."

"Happy birthday, Wheeler!" Amber says. "You ready for your present?"

"Yeah," he chokes through a haze of marijuana.

"Come on then."

They lead him into the other bedroom.

I feel myself getting hard again, the Viagra taking effect. I wander to the bedroom Wheeler was in earlier. The blond whore is sitting at Wheeler's desk, doing a line.

"Hello," I say.

"You ready for your turn?" she asks, wiping her nose and sniffing.

"I think so."

I'm fucking her hard when I start to think.

I think of Lisa, of mangled fetuses, of dumpster babies. I think of the president's smiling face, Atlanta burning to the ground, over-sized black dildos stuffed into tiny puckered holes.

I think of decapitated heads and bowls filled with wet eyeballs. I think about spray on tans, network television, and buildings crumbling to the ground. Sandy beaches, red tide, swarms of dead fish floating on the waves. Redcoats, yankees, hate. Sharp needles in pale skin, pills, and baggies of white powder. Satellites and meteors streaking around my brain

If I could, I would crush the Earth in my palm. The insides would be bloody and crunchy, like the undeveloped body of a baby chicken taken too early from the egg.

I start to hit her.

Then I'm sitting with my legs in the hot tub, drinking rum straight from the bottle. My manhood is still hard and reaching up towards my belly button. My knuckles are sore, raw, bleeding. Even through the drugs they sting when I dip my hands into the boiling, chlorinated water.

I stare at the purple veins and stretch marks decorating my thighs.

Something wants me dead, but I'm not sure what. Maybe everything. I want to talk to Lisa, hear her voice one last time, but I don't know what I'd say.

Leaning forward, I let myself tumble into the hot tub. I float face down among the frothing bubbles - like a corpse in a bad movie. I breathe in bitter hot water. It scalds my insides and suffocates my lungs. The world turns red. The world turns black. The world slips away.

They pull me out and force me to breath, pumping my chest and forcing air into my lungs. When I open my eyes Wheeler is staring down at me, tiny strands of spit lacing from his mouth to mine.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" he screams.

Dylan is behind him, peering down. Kandi is clutching his arm and staring at me. She looks terrified.

"Why did you do that?" I sputter.

"Do what? You were fucking drowning, you asshole!"

Dylan pulls a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, taps one out, and puts it between my lips.

"Smoke this and relax," he says and flicks his lighter.

"Why are you naked?" Wheeler asks.

"Why not?" I say.

"You beat up that hooker up real bad. Now you're trying to

drown yourself in my hot tub. Handle your fucking drugs, man."

"I don't feel good," I tell them.

"No shit," Wheeler snaps.

"It'll be okay," Kandi tells me. "There's no reason to hurt yourself."

I stare at her - me naked on the ground, her naked above me.

"Kill me," I say.

She kneels beside me and puts a small hand on my shoulder.

"Whatever it is, it's not that bad," she says.

"Bullshit," I moan. "You have no fucking idea how bad it is."

"I've never seen him this bad," Dylan says, arms folded.

The gray light of dawn is beginning to rise around us. Wheeler stands, takes Kandi by the arm and pulls her up with him.

"He gets like this sometimes. Just let him alone," he tells her. He turns to Dylan. "Remember the time he drove his truck into that house, saying he wanted to die?"

Dylan stares down at me. Wheeler leads the Kandi inside and calls over his shoulder, "If you're gonna kill yourself, don't do it at my house. Have some fucking consideration, man," and he's gone.

"You alright?" Dylan asks.

"No. Lisa killed our baby."

"What?"

"She had an abortion."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Thanks."

"Wanna talk?" he asks.

"Nope."

"You done with the stupid shit for tonight?"

"Yes."

"Alright. Come back inside now." Then he's gone too.

On my back, the cement of the patio feels like little knives against my skin. The cigarette and my cock both reach for the sky.



That Viagra really works.

Yellow light reaches out from the house through the big plate glass windows. I turn my head, blow smoke around the cigarette clamped in my lips, and stare at the empty bottle of rum. A grinning pirate stares back at me from the label.

Using an index finger, I reach out and push the bottle to its side, then push it again and watch as it rolls away, wobbling and clattering against the hard, rough ground.

I cry. The dawn rises.

There is no redemption.

\*

The gun I've chosen is a chrome .45.

I sit on the floor, holding the pistol in my lap and watching the fluorescent light catch and sparkle off the shiny metal of the barrel. It's a beautiful weapon, a wonderful tool for the job.

Fred lies next to me, his head resting on his paws, his dark eyes watching my face.

Has my life been worth it, worth living? Have my ideas, my views, been the right ones? My choices correct? Should I have tried to change the wrongs I've seen? Given people my truths? Converted their blindness?

No.

I've seen the way people are. Time and time again, I've watched as they set aside the horror of logic for the comfort of disillusionment. The idea of randomness is terrifying, the absence of a higher purpose crippling. People don't want that, but that is what we all face.

Philosophy is a farce, it's students simply men seeking some-

something that's not there. The numbers don't lie. Everything is controlled by chance.

Why do some of us see this, the few freaks like me? Is it my brain? My sick, abnormal brain? A side effect brought on by my disease? Am I really even sick at all, or am I just so frighteningly different that society needs to label me as such?

I'm evil, I know that. I've committed horrors, terrible things, that disqualify any legitimacy I may once have had. No one would listen to me now even if I tried to tell them.

So many questions still, here at the end. Maybe I'm just wrong, wrong about everything, so disillusioned with sickness that my beliefs, the things I see as truth, are merely the ultimate game being played by my mind.

I'll know soon enough.

I tuck the gun into my waistband, then struggle to my knees and kneel before Fred, taking his long, floppy brown ears between my hands and rubbing his head all over. His tail beats quick dull thuds against the floor, and he rolls onto his back, offering me his taut round belly.

Scratching him, I see a swollen, purplish tick down by his balls.

"Uh-oh, buddy. Hold on and let daddy get that off."

There's an old pack of cigarettes on my dresser, and I shake one out and light it. I take a few drags to get it going, then use one hand to pet Fred while lowering the cigarette towards the tick with the other. My hand is steady, but as it floats there, holding the red hot ember inches from Fred's skin, I can't do it.

"Alright, Freddy. Daddy's a pussy. I'm scared I'll burn you. Wait here a minute."

I go into the bathroom and flick the cigarette into the toilet, then rifle through the closet looking for the small toolbox I keep there. I find it, take out a pair of blue-handled pliers, and return to

the bedroom.

Fred's up on my bed now, trying to bury himself in the pillows. When he hears me, he stops and spins his head around to study me.

"Come here."

He lays down, nervous and confused.

"Come here," I call again.

I go over and start to lift him, but he wiggles away and jumps to the floor.

"Alright, buddy."

I kneel down beside him and flip him over, then clamp the pliers onto the swollen tick. It pops, and an enormous amount of sick, burgundy blood oozes out. The tick holds for a moment as I try to free it. Rows of tiny black legs, buried in flesh, resist and pull up Fred's skin. I finally manage to rip it free.

"Good boy."

I pet Fred's belly. The tick is flat and looks like a round slice of discolored skin. I use a tissue and try to clean the blood off of Fred. Some of it up comes up, staining my hands and making the tissue wet, but most just smears into a dark stain on his fur. I pet him some more and tell him I love him, then go downstairs.

Paul's watching television in the living room. Lucy and Blue are on the floor. They raise their heads to watch me. Paul glances up.

"What's up?"

"Not much," I say.

"What's with the pistol."

"Think I'll do some shootin'."

"Alright." He takes a sip from the beer he's keeping between his legs.

I pet the other dogs and kiss them both on the top of their heads, then head for the door.

"Goddam," I mutter, standing at the entrance. "It's fucking snowing."

White flakes fall slowly from the gray sky. The wind throws occasional gust, and the snow billows in little clouds before hitting the ground.

"Haven't seen that in awhile," Paul says, watching from the couch.

"Not in a long while. Years. I don't think I've seen snow since I was a kid."

"Sounds about right. You sure you're alright?"

"Just fine."

"You might want a jacket, goin' out there."

"I'm fine. Keep the dogs in here. I don't want them following me."

I close the door slowly behind me and begin to walk down the driveway. When I turn back, Paul's watching me through the window. I wave to him and keep going.

Most of the snow melts as it hits the ground, but some clings to my shirt and builds up on my shoulders. I try to pinch it off and put it in my mouth, but it turns to water between my fingers and runs down the back of my hand.

When I get to the lake, I go to the little slope that runs down to the water, pull the gun from my waist, and take a seat on the cold, dead grass.

At the other end of the lake, the murky brown water has begun to form into a thin layer of ice. Snow in South Georgia. It's a special day.

The frozen ground melts beneath my ass. The seat of my pants grows wet as the freezing water seeps through my jeans. The weight of the pistol feels good in my hand. Dark blood from the tick has dried under my fingernails, and the sight turns my stomach.

I wretch, the bile burning the back of my throat, then hack up the thick gunk in the back of my throat and spit it towards the water.

In the distance, a rabbit hops from the tree line, looks around, sees me, and flees back to the safety of the woods.

I imagine myself lying here, a small hole in one side of my head a huge gaping crater on the other, brain and skull splattered out onto the dead grass, hot blood bubbling violently, pouring from the wound and melting the thin layer of snow on the ground around my body.

I think it will be beautiful.

Life. It's a goddamned thing. I should probably be thinking something poignant here. Oh well.

There really are no happy endings.

I put the barrel of the gun to my temple, pull back the hammer, and, as my finger squeezes the trigger, I realize -

\*

The women walk slowly down the hallway, their heels clicking against the hardwood floor. The sound echoes off eggshell white walls, decorated with ancient, fading artwork. Their words are whispers.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't come earlier," the shorter woman says.

"We called you almost three months ago."

"I was in the countryside. Teaching in a little village. They still don't have phones over there, once you get out of the cities. I got on the plane as soon as I got back to the hotel and the clerk gave me the message."

"Well, I'm glad you're here now."

"Brain damaged. Terrible. He just sits in his room all day with this stupid smile on his face." The taller woman begins to cry. "The doctors says we shouldn't expect him to get any better than he is now."

"At least he's alive. We should thank God for that."

"Thank God." She wipes at her eyes.

"Did he...do you know why he did it?"

"No."

"He didn't leave a note? Don't people usually leave a note when they do this kind of thing? He didn't say anything to anyone?"

"I don't know. I mean, he didn't tell anyone, and he didn't leave a note." She rubs her eyes, smooths the front of her dress. "Are you ready?"

The shorter woman takes a deep breath. "Yes."

They open the door and step into the room.

A bald man sits on the floor. There's a strip of white bandage on his head, held to the skin with strips of white tape. Three dogs - their heads come up when the women enter - are sprawled around him. Wooden blocks are stacked into a simple square building next to a plastic container. A television is playing cartoons.

The man looks at the women, his face vacant, his smile real.

"Aunt Caroline is here to see you," the taller woman, his mother, says. "Tell her hello."

"Hello, Aunt Caroline," the man says.

Caroline walks to him and kneels. "How are you, Reilly?"

The man glances at his mother.

"Are you good?" she asks, nodding her head.

"I'm good," Reilly tells his aunt.

"Good, honey. Good." Caroline traces her fingers around the bandage. "Does it hurt?"

"No," Reilly tells her, watching the cartoons over his aunt's

shoulder.

"I remember the day you were born," Caroline says. "We were all so happy. You're father carried you out into the waiting room."

Reilly's mother begins to cry again.

"He was so proud when he showed you to us."

"That was the best day of my life," Reilly's mother gasps through her tears.

Reilly looks away from the television, studies the women. He reaches out a hand to pet one of the dogs.

"Don't cry," he tells his mother.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I have to wait outside." She leaves the room.

Reilly and his aunt stare at one another.

"Why did you do it, Reilly?"

"Do what?"

"Why did you hurt yourself?"

Reilly picks up a block, rolls it in his hand, then adds it to the others. One of the dogs, a black lab, puts its head in his lap and he rubs its ears.

Reilly looks to his aunt, the smile still on his face.

"I'm happy now."

\*